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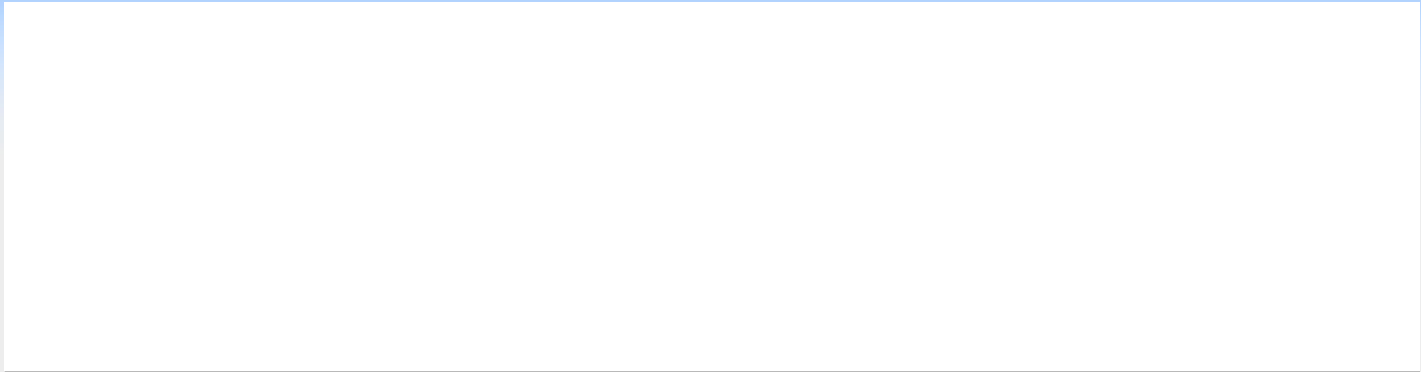


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King Kelly Coleman and the Ballad of Carr Creek

By **Nick Roush** on ©June 26th, 2013 @ 1:20pm
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This Spring I was lucky enough to enroll in an Appalachian Geography class at UK. Exploring the cultural past of our ancestors charged me to look further into the impact of basketball over the last 100+ years. Usually KSR posts are limited to facts found on the internet,

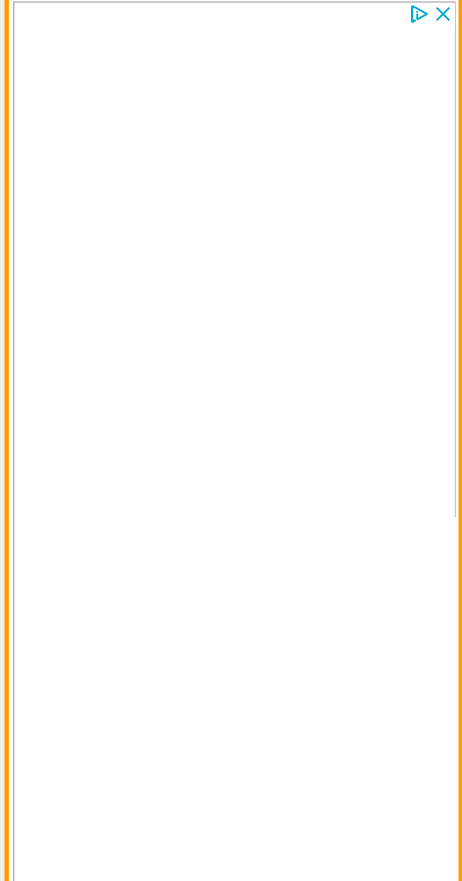
this summer I will be taking that one step further. With the help of William T. Young Library's archives and the Mountains' Finest Oscar Combs, I will re-tell some of the greatest stories from the past that are often left out of the equation for those that were not around to see it firsthand. [1928: The Barefoot Boys of Carr Creek and the Undefeated Ashland Tomcats](#), [Johnny Cox's Hazard Heroics](#)

If Bill Shakespeare ever wrote a drama based on East Kentucky, you wouldn't find him at the McCoy House. **The 1956 State Basketball Tournament might be the most dramatic tale never told in sports.** I've written this story before, researched it for countless hours, but it still amazes me how a story this close to home can feel like fiction from the 1500s (they EKY dialect can sometimes be just as difficult as Shakespeare to understand). Grab your popcorn, and try to remember what you learned in sophomore English class about Shakespearean tragedies.

The 1956 basketball season was a tale of two teams from East Kentucky that seemed like the same to most, but were actually perfect opposites, representing ideological differences of good and evil. The Wayland Wasps were the sexiest team in the state with a Knight in Shining Armor leading the way. This Knight from Coal Country in Floyd County was more of a King than a Knight, Kelly Coleman was (and always will be) the best high school player the state of Kentucky has ever seen. Just as prep basketball began taking off on a national scale, **the King was considered the best of the best, head and shoulders above his counterparts Oscar Robertson and Jerry West.** Described by Oscar Combs as, "a man among boys," Coleman finished his career averaging 33.6 points per game before breaking four of his own state records in the 1956 Tournament.

Coleman was to fulfill his destiny during the 1956 Sweet Sixteen by taking home a State Championship, winning Mr. Basketball, and breaking Johnny Cox's scoring record set just one year prior. **The scoring phenom didn't realize that he'd have to go through vengeful, mean SOB's from Carr Creek to achieve immortal status.** If you remember, 28 years before the 'Barefoot Boys' from Carr Creek took the eventual undefeated National Champions to 4 OTs before falling in the State Championship game. Despite the optimism brought to the area after a successful season, the Creekers wouldn't rest easy until they won the title. Just like their 1928 predecessors, their team defense made it nearly impossible for teams to score. The underdogs of the tourney, they filled the familiar role with pride, prepared to go toe-to-toe with the best of the best. Ask, and they did receive.

Coleman entered the state semi-final game against Carr Creek averaging an astonishing **46.8 points per game.** The King only needed two more wins to complete his destiny, while complementing his ridiculous record-setting resume (he scored 68 points during the tourney's first game, something I DARE a high schooler to pull off now). With a chance to play for the state title on the line, on March 13, 1956 legends from the past met a legend of the present. Those that attended the early Saturday morning game at Memorial Coliseum were in for a treat. The Creekers' suffocating defense had never been better, with Carr Creek's Jim Calhoun **holding Coleman to a career-low of 28 points** (A record-setting 28 rebounds wasn't too shabby though). In 1996, Calhoun could only explain the phenomena one way, "God was with me." This divine intervention kept the game close into the waning minutes of the game. **With 4 seconds left, the Indians' Freddie Maggard scored a one-handed tip in, slaying the King 68-67.** Maggard, along with future UK player E.A. Couch finally brought the trophy home later that afternoon when they defeated Henderson 72-68. The Creekers' underdog triumph solidified their place in history, fulfilling their own destiny that began nearly 30 years before.



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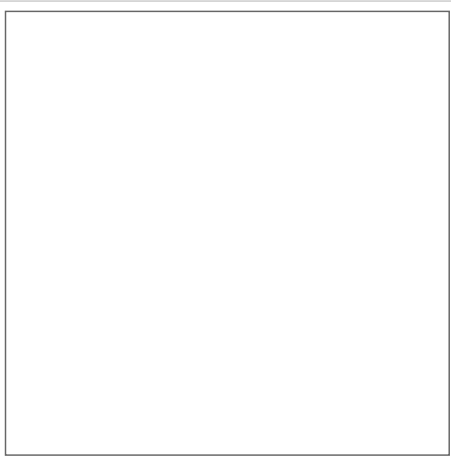
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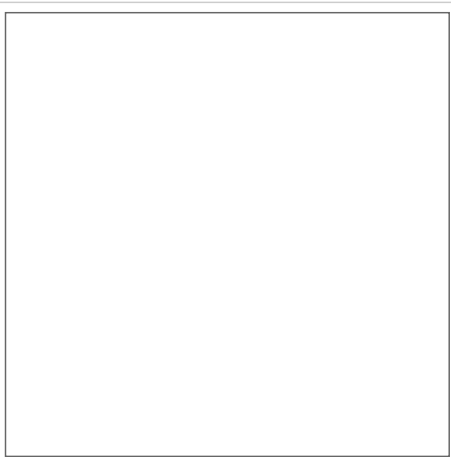
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*This celebration had been a "long time coming".
(h/t kentucky.com)*

The 1956 State Tournament was also the last high point in the mythical King's journey. After setting the State Tournament scoring record of 185 points in the 3rd place game, blowing past Johnny Cox's mark of 127, **Coleman was pictured on the front page of *The Lexington Herald* being carried off the court wearing a crown, before being named the State's Mr. Basketball.** It amazes me that his hero status was so great that Carr Creek's Championship victory was merely a footnote for local journalists. The National High School Player of the Year, touted as better than Oscar Robertson, was set to form a dynamic duo with Jerry West at West Virginia University the next fall, but **no Shakespearean tragedy would be complete without a tragic flaw.** "He looked like a boy among men because he'd been drinking beer, probably since he was 13," noted Oscar Combs, adding to what was seen as common knowledge at the time. That may not have been a problem for Coleman had he chose to play for Adolph Rupp, but the coal camp his father worked for was based out of West Virginia. **The company had provided for his family his entire life, and even more so after he decided to become a Mountaineer.** Later on in life Coleman told the *Pikeville Medical Leader*, ""The guy who was my sponsor gave me a car to drive," he explained. "I had, I believe, a 1955 Dodge, a Gulf credit card for gasoline, about 15 pairs of shoes, and four or five suits. I probably had the nicest clothes in Floyd County over my last two months in high school. If I needed money, I got it. I was engaged to be married in high school during my last year, and he (the sponsor) paid for the rings." Rupp knew 'foul' play was involved, (allegedly) sending NCAA officers to investigate the phenom that was set to leave the state in the fall. Coleman was ruled ineligible, never recovering from the setback while suffering from alcoholism for the remainder of his days. Trying to live up to the 'King' reputation ultimately led to the downfall of the greatest player to ever pick up a basketball in Kentucky.



The King (left) makes a 2005 book signing appearance with Gary P. West (right), the author of King Kelly Coleman: Kentucky's Greatest Basketball Legend

Never did I imagine in my wildest high school dreams that the confusing dialogue of Shakespeare would apply to something in my life. The "Fall of the King" depicts a **an a-generation hero with a tragic flaw** (his alcoholism reminds me of King Lear wall



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in the rain). Initially a beacon of hope for those around the state, Kelly could never conquer his **internal conflict** by fulfilling his destiny as the G.O.A.T. If that doesn't fulfill the Shakespearean moniker, Carr Creek's **revenge** of the Barefoot Boys is just one element that perfectly fits in as an opposing force. A **supernatural force** impeded (Calhoun's divine intervention against the King), leaving a **moment of chance** (Maggard's one-handed game-winning tip in with 4 seconds left) to catastrophically derail the King's destiny.

Shakespeare always taught us a lesson, despite it being very unclear until your English teacher could relay the message. Taking the role as English teacher, I feel that this lesson is **the best real-life portrayal of good vs. evil**. There are two clear sides, but it's difficult to discern which side is 'good' and which is 'evil'. This gray area is why living your daily life is so difficult. For the most part, we tread near the line of 'good', but the King teaches us that it does not take much 'evil' to damn you away from the 'good' forever. No matter which side you empathize for, we can all agree that moments like this from EKY set the foundation in creating the best basketball state in the nation.

*-Thanks to all of my sources, from the Old Herald, to the new H-L, Oscar Combs, and many more in between. I couldn't have done this without using hundreds of your guys' help.
@RoushKSR*

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