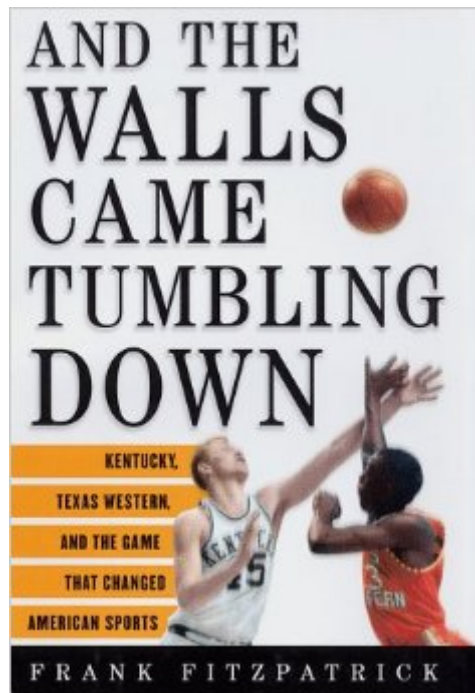


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And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, And The Game That Changed American Sports



Synopsis

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

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Customer Reviews

Ironically, "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game That Changed American Sports," preserves a stereotypical view of the game that presumably challenged a prevailing stereotype. The controversial figure in this story has always been Adolph Rupp, coach of the Kentucky Wildcats, whose "Rupp's Runts" were the last all-white team to play for the championship in the NCAA mens basketball title game. Fitzpatrick makes Rupp the iconic figure of white racism. Indeed, before the game, Rupp told the press that a team of five black players could not beat a team of five white players. However, certainly Rupp was not alone in that holding that stupid position. While it would not be surprising that Rupp, as a older Southern white man, would be a racist, his attempts to recruit future pros Wes Unseld and Butch Beard would seem to suggest he might have been something short of a card carrying member of the Klan. Yet Rupp is demonized throughout the book, while his players, most notably Pat Riley and Louie Dampier, are forced into the role of apologists. Unfortunately, Rupp's legacy pretty much ended with this game, while Riley and Dampier both got to prove their willingness to play not only against but with blacks in professional basketball. I had spent years booing Don Haskins and the Miners in the Pit in Albuquerque for years before I found out that UTEP had once been Texas Western and how won the NCAA title in 1966. The final score was 72-65, but as they often say, the game was never really that close. Fitzpatrick does assemble all the stories and quotes needed to give you a sense for what happened and how it was seen as important.

Frank Fitzpatrick has undertaken and successfully written a much needed book that should set the record straight forever about Texas Western College in El Paso and the much revered Don Haskins in 1966. "And The Walls Came Tumbling Down" is well-researched, beautifully structured and concisely written as pure as journalism can offer. Hey - if you were a part of the memorable experience like I was in El Paso as a 10-year-old youngster in 1966, you remember all the fine print and details. Fitzpatrick does make one serious error. He writes in Chapter 10 that Texas Western was not invited back the following season in 1967 to the NCAA. Wrong. The Miners went to the tournament's western regional and fell a game shy of playing a UCLA team led by a sophomore named Lew Alcinder. It would have been a pleasure to read Fitzpatrick's hypothesis about the dream meeting - Texas Western's David Lattin and a transfer from New York that year named Phil Harris versus Alcinder. Could you have imagined? Thank God the Philadelphia journalist came along and put some sacred cows like Sports Illustrated and its James Olsen series in 1968 and the thoroughly disgusting James Michener's analysis of the Miners in his "Sports in America" book where they rightfully belong - in the trash can. "The real story of Texas Western's championship team is far different from the myth that has grown around it," Fitzpatrick writes. YEA! Fitzpatrick deserves more than a pat on the back for accurately describing El Paso and what we thought of our heroes. He should be hugged. He accurately writes there wasn't the faintest hint of exploitation or racism toward black athletes. Fitzpatrick successfully portrays who those Miners were. They were winners. They were El Paso. Ultimately, they were us.

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