

Change Of Pace

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When the count reached five one television buff jumped up from his seat and loudly proclaimed, "man, this is out of sight."

He was referring to the superbly talented Texas Western Miners basketball team that had just been introduced to the crowd prior to the start of the national collegiate basketball championship game against Kentucky last week. Strangely, numerous cage followers were caught with their trunks down as far as the Miners were concerned.

Few individuals (not readers of this column,) it turns out, were aware of the fact that the Miners floored five Negroes on their starting five this season. Even less, gave the galloping Texans any sort of a chance against a Kentucky team that had been built up as some sort of supermen from another planet.

Yet, when the dust of battle had cleared, there was Kentucky, tears and all, accepting the prizes that go to losers. The Wildcats had met their masters and were now as tame as kittens.

In many respects this was a game that featured the Old South and the new. Several years ago when the color barrier tumbled, Texas-Western coach Kon Haskins, was suddenly given a new lease on life.

Like a schoolboy who had just been told he no longer needed to ask permission to visit the rest room, the 36 year old cage mentor, suddenly had free reign to get the type of team he wanted. As a result, word went out all across the country that Texas Western was interested in basketball players. The color of their skin didn't matter.

With the aid of accomplished talent scouts the deluge began. Harry Flourney and Orsten Artis arrived on the scene from Indiana. New York City was represented by Willie Cager, Willie Worsley and Nevil Shed. From the "Big D", Detroit, came swift Bobby Hill. The only player from Texas was a Houston high school sensation named David Lattin. He was the only starter from the Lone Star state.

While Texas Western was loading up on talent, Kentucky continued following the line of least resistance. Even though the state of Kentucky lowered its racial bars, the biggest school in the state still stayed lilly white on the cage court.

Still, when payoff time arrived this year, it was felt by virtually all of the nations top basketball selectors that Texas Western was a team that didn't belong on the same court as the Wildcats. Few people took into consideration that the Miners record, 27-1, going into the championship game, was the the equal of Kentucky's. The feeling persisted that the caliber of the Miner's opposition was inferior. It didn't turn out that way at all. Before the second half was very old, Kentucky was virtually eliminated. Once the Wildcats got as close as 39-38, but then they faded. Texas went on to build a 68-57 margin and never looked back.

There are many heroes among the seven Negroes Texas Western used in the game. But the two biggest were undoubtedly Hill, who stands 5-10 and steals a basketball with the cleverness of a bank robber, and husky 6-7 Lattin who pulls down rebounds like he is picking cherries out of a tree.

For Kentucky and its thousands of faithful followers, the defeat must have been crushing. Not only did the Wildcats lose the opportunity to bring the school its fifth national cage title, the team missed out on the opportunity of proving that there are schools who can still win the big title without Negro players.

Throughout the country coaches have been whispering among themselves that Negro players help bring major titles.