A Study in Black & White, 1966

By Bryan Woolley

Game photography by Rich Clarkson

As they arrived one by one at the hotel, they shook hands, embraced, kidded each other about gray hair, bald spots, heavier bodies and slower feet. They marveled that a quarter century had passed since the remarkable thing that they had done. They were returning to celebrate the memory of it with their old school and the city. But first they would celebrate with their coach and each other.

"It’s great to see all these guys in one place again, to tell the good old war stories," said Nevil Shed. "It makes us feel warm inside to have a city as great as El Paso still remember something that we did for them. And we don’t forget what they did for us."

Twenty-five years ago, Coach Don Haskins said, it never entered his mind that they had done anything special. But few who saw it happen would forget it.

For the first time, an all-black team had played an all-white team for the NCAA national basketball championship. The black men had won. History had been made. The Texas Western Miners had changed college basketball forever.

But it was 1966. The march from Selma to Montgomery had happened only a year before, and the struggle for the rights of black people still held the country in turmoil.

Civil rights workers still were being shot. Arsonists still were torching black churches. Gov. George Wallace still was defying a school desegregation order in Alabama. A congressional committee was investigating the Ku Klux Klan. The Georgia Legislature was refusing to seat a newly elected black representative named Julian Bond. Rioting had broken out in a Los Angeles neighborhood called Watts. And Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was promising to take the civil rights movement northward to Chicago.

A lot of people in the country didn’t like the kind of history that the team from Texas had made.

"I was so young and naive," Haskins remembers. "I hadn’t thought of it as putting an all-black team on the court. I was simply playing the best players I had. It’s what I had done all year. Then we came home, and the hate mail started pouring in. I got them for months. Thousands of letters, from all over the South."

The letters were only the beginning of his bitter time. A dozen years after winning the greatest athletic triumph in his own life and the history of his school, he would say: "If I could change one thing about my coaching career, I’d wish we came in second in 1966."

On the night of March 19, 1966, the Texas Western College Miners walked onto a court in College Park, Md., to play the University of Kentucky Wildcats in the final game of the NCAA tournament.

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Tending the tournament thought would really determine the championship, the Wildcats had beaten the nation’s No. 2 team, Duke. If the Wildcats beat the Miners, as almost everybody expected, they would give Kentucky and its legendary 64-year-old coach, Adolph Rupp, their fifth national championship.

The Miners were the Cinderella team of the season. Texas Western College — now the University of Texas at El Paso — was a small group of buildings perched on a desert hillside a few hundred yards from the remote Rio Grande and Mexico. Some 6,000 students were enrolled there. The Miners’ 36-year-old coach was in his first college job. A few years earlier, he had been coaching boys’ and girls’ basketball at tiny Heley High School in the Texas Panhandle and doubling as the school bus driver to make ends meet.

Until the 1965-66 season, no one in big-time college basketball had paid much attention to Texas Western. In its entire history it had won only one NCAA tournament. And at the time it was an "outsider" team, an independent, belonging to no athletic conference. Since none of the major basketball schools had bothered to recruit any of Haskins’ players, the Eastern and Midwestern press had dismissed them as "castoffs," "unknowns" and "nondescripts."

But the Miners also had compiled a 23-1 record during the regular season, and when the tournament started, they were ranked No. 3 in the country. After an easy victory over Oklahoma City University in their first tournament game, they had ripped Kansas and Cincinnati, both in overtime.

"I ran into people who remember that game, and they still think I went to an all-black school," said Willie Worsley.

Of course, Texas Western wasn’t an all-black college. Far from it. A large percentage of the small group of black students on campus had been recruited from all over the country for their skills at basketball, football and track. El Paso, where a majority of the citizens are Hispanic and Mexico’s fourth-largest city lies over the river, had comparatively few black resi-
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Nor were the Miners really an all-black team. Of the 12 men on the squad, five—Togo Railey, Jerry Armstrong, David Palacio, Louis Baudoin and Dick Myers—were white. All had played in games during the season, and Armstrong had been instrumental in winning the NCAA semifinal game, coming off the bench to shut down Utah’s star shooter, Jerry Chambers.

They and the seven black players were a close-knit group. “We used to drink wine in the dorm together because we didn’t have the money to go out,” Palacio said.

“We used to play a lot of cards. It was friendship, pure friendship. I don’t remember a single instance of race being an issue or a problem among us.”

But the team’s seven best players—Bobby Joe Hill, Orsten Artis, David Latim, Willie Cager, Harry Flournoy, Nevil Shed and Willie Worsley—were black, and they were the only players who got into the game against the Wildcats, the only Miners seen on TV.

In its entire history, Kentucky had never had a black player. Neither Adolph Rupp nor any other coach in the Southeastern Conference had ever attempted to recruit one.

“It was the first time such a thing had happened,” Haskins said, “and it was against mighty Kentucky and The Baron. Had it been against a team with some black players, probably nothing would have been said of it.”

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Midway through the first quarter, with the Miners leading by one point, Bobbi Joe Hill stole the ball, dribbled down the court and made an easy layup. As Kentucky was bringing the ball back up the court, Hill stole it again, dribbled down the court and made another easy layup, giving the Miners a five-point lead. The Wildcats never recovered. Texas Western won, 72-65. For the first time, a Rupp team had been beaten in an NCAA championship game.

“It wasn’t even close as the score indicates,” Otis Artis said. “At one point we led by 17. Our easiest games in that tournament were the first one, against Oklahoma City, and the last one, against Kentucky.”

After the game, the Kentucky players—minus their coach—went to the Miners’ locker room and congratulated them.

“There wasn’t any racial thing as far as the two teams were concerned,” Artis said.

The next day, 10,000 delicious fans turned out at El Paso International Airport to welcome home the only team from Texas ever to win the NCAA Division I national championship. Willie Cager made a speech: “From all of us to all of you, No. 1 was the best we could do.” The crowd was wild. There was a parade through the town.

“It was wonderfully crazy,” Willie Worsley said. “The people of El Paso made us feel very special.”

“I went until later on,” Nevil Shed said. “But I started making that this team had opened the doors, not just for blacks but for all minorities, so have an opportunity to play ball at some of the top-notch schools around the United States. What was so beautiful about it was that the very next year things began to open up.”

Soon after Adolph Rupp would recruit a black player. But he was a sore loser. “I hate to see these boys from Texas Western win,” he told the press after the game. “Not because of race or anything like that, but because of the number of recruits it represents.”

Hawkins’ players had done documentary scenes in the past and that Texas Western had practiced with a score of 100. But a number of sportswriters fell behind in the book.

“The title really should belong to Kentuckiana and The Baron,” he said. “I have heard that one of the top Texas Western players had been charged with a major crime to the public.”

He seemed more at ease, away from the TV lights. He said about driving the school bus at Benjamins, Texas, the first place he coached.

Three hundred people lived in Benjamins, he said. He coached girls’ and boys’ basketball and six-man football, even though he had never seen a player. His team won the district championship. They still remember that in Benjamins, he said. “It’s the only championship they’ve ever won.”

He moved on to Hildreth, which had 500 people. He drove the school bus there, too, for four years. “I couldn’t have survived without the bus-driving job,” he said. Then he went to Dumas, a town of 12,000. “Dumas looked like a big city to me,” he said.

But after only a year, Hawkins was asked by Ben Collins, the athletic director and football coach of Texas Western College, to come to El Paso and talk with him and George McCarr, who was retiring as ‘TWC’s’ basketball coach, and President Joseph Ray.

Thedark he offered a job. He took it. He never thought before he moved to an all-black city, they’ve been wonderful to me. This is a great place to work.

Then we talked about the 1966 championship again, and what it has meant to him. “The most fun of the whole thing is that there isn’t one guy on the entire team who hasn’t done well,” he said. “It’s a funny thing about competition. People who are in sports or what have you, it’s not going to be as it was they’ll never succeed at whatever they choose to do. But they’re just as happy.”

The Bear smiled.

—Dwight Wooley
They were a bunch of crooks," Rupp said. "One was on parole from Tennessee State Prison. Two had been kicked out of a junior college in Iowa. Texas Western was suspended by the NCAA for three years after that."

David Lattin had transferred from Tennessee State University, not the state prison, and Bobby Joe Hill and a player on the Texas Western freshman team—not the championship squad—had transferred from Burlington, Iowa, Junior College. There were no ineligible players on the team. Texas Western had never been suspended by the NCAA for any reason. Indeed, the NCAA had investigated the allegations after the tournament and had given the school a clean bill of health.

"I didn't like us being called misfits, criminals and convicts," Nevil Shed said at the team's reunion. "My mother and father worked hard to bring me up, to make sure that I represented myself in a well-mannered attitude. The people who did that to us didn't really know us. If they had taken the time to look into what those seven blacks were all about, they would have found some pretty impressive guys."

Rupp's vilifications dogged Haskins for years. "I would go to a coaching clinic," he said, "and somebody would come up to me and ask, 'Did you really get that guy out of the pen?'

But the most serious damage was done in 1968, when Sports Illustrated published a five-part series entitled "The Black Athlete. Part 3," the centerpiece of the series, entitled "In An Alien World," was devoted entirely to the University of Texas at El Paso (the name of the school had been changed a year earlier) and its alleged exploitation of its black athletes, including the 1966 basketball champions.

"One might suppose that a school which has so thoroughly and actively exploited black athletes would be breaking itself in half to give them something in return, both in appreciation for the achievements of the past and to assure a steady flow of black athletes in the future," wrote its author, Jack Olsen. "One might think that UTEP, with its famed Negro basketball players, its Negro football stars and its predominantly Negro track team would be determined to give its black athletes the very squarest of square deals. But the Negroes on the campus insist this is not the case—far from it.

Olsen went on to describe UTEP and El Paso as a kind of racist hell in which the athletes labored in virtual slavery. The article outraged almost everyone connected with the University. Perhaps El Paso and UTEP hadn't achieved a racial paradise during the turbulent '60s, but, they contended, they had come closer than much of the country and many of its universities.

The athletes said that statements attributed to them in the article had been taken out of context and twisted. A flurry of rebuttal whirled through the local press. UTEP President Joseph Smiley ordered an internal investigation of the school's intercollegiate athletic programs. The investigating committee found no major racial injustices, but recommended a few small reforms, most of them having nothing to do with race.

Olsen and Sports Illustrated stood by their article, however, and that made recruiting very hard for Haskins. "Every coach in the country had a copy of that article in his back pocket," he said. "And whenever a black player would indicate an interest in UTEP, they would yank it out and say, 'You don't want to go to El Paso. It's a horrible place.'"

In 1975, Neil D. Isaacs, a college professor, published a book called All the Moves: A History of College Basketball. Relying entirely on Olsen's article as his source, he cited the 1966 Texas Western team as the best example of the abuse of black athletes in America. "There was little in the way of social rewards for them in El Paso," he wrote, "none of them was ever awarded a degree from Texas Western, and they feel that they have lived out the full meaning of
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A year later, one of America’s most famous authors took up the tune, adding a few licks of his own. In Sports in America, James A. Michener described the 1966 Miners as “a bunch of loose-goosed ragger-muffins,” who had been “censored” to play basketball in El Paso.

“The El Paso story is one of the most whacked in the history of American sports,” he wrote. “...I have often thought how much luckier the white players were under Coach Adolph Rupp. He looked after his players; they had a shot at a real education; and they were secure within the traditions of their university, their community and their state. They may have lost the playoff, but they were the winners in every other respect, and their black opponents from El Paso were losers.”

Years before Michener’s book was published, eight of the 1966 squad—the five white plus Nevil Sheid, Harry Flournoy and Willie Cager—had received their degrees at UTEP. David Lattin had left early because he was drafted by the Phoenix Suns. “He had a year of eligibility left, but I encouraged him to go,” Haskins said. “There was a lot of money in for him, and I kept thinking, ‘What is he playing another season for me and raises a knee or something?’” The re- maining three players—Ornus Arnts, Bobby Joe Hill and Willard Washington—had arranged between 78 and 115 semester hours of credit before they dropped out of school to take their jobs.

Michener, who often brings the amount of research that goes into his massive books, later admitted in a letter to Dr. Mirra Ginsberg, a UTEP English professor, that his investigation of the 1966 Miners had gone no further than the Sports Illustrated articles. He had talked to Nevil Sheid and Haskins nor the players nor even Owen.

Haskins wanted to sue Michener for libel, but his lawyer talked him out of it. He didn’t have the resources, the lawyer said, to fight the author and his publisher, Random House, in the courts.

“I had no fun after winning the national championship,” Haskins said.

H is one of the most influential coaches in the game. During his 30 seasons at Texas Western/UTEP his teams have won 579 games and lost 258. Six of his teams have won the Western Athletic Conference championship five have played in the National Invitational Tournament and 15 in the NCAA tournament. Crippled by injuries and the schizophrenic inefficility of a key player, his Miners didn’t make it to the NCAA this year. It was the first time in eight years that they weren’t there.

Today Nevil Sheid is the director of intramural athletics at the University of Texas at San Antonio; David Lattin is in public relations in Houston; Harry Flournoy is in sales for a baking company in California; Bobby Joe Hill is senior buyer for El Paso Natural Gas in El Paso; Dick Myers is vice president of a clothing manufacturing company in Florida, David Palacio is vice president of Columbia Records in California; Ornsen Arnts is a detective on the Clay, Ind., police force; the others—Jerry Armstrong, Louis Baudouin, Willie Cager, Tego Ratley and Walter Worsley—are teachers and school administrators in Texas, Missouri, New Mexico and New York state.

On the day of the 1991 Minerals’ last home game and the close of Haskins’ 30th season at UTEP, fans by the hundreds would stand in line at El Paso’s Big shopping malls to have the 1966 champions autograph posters, pictures, pennants and basketballs. Later, during halftime of UTEP’s game with New Mexico, the crowd would rise to its feet and cheer the aging heroes once more, and their school would present them with replicas of their old jerseys.

First, though, they would take deep into the night, reliving their days of glory. “We won some games while we always were here,” Haskins told them, “but the thing that makes me the happiest is each and every one of you has turned out to be a fine citizen and a good person and all of you are doing well. That’s the most important thing of all.”

He is in the sight of his career, he said. He has mellowed, he said, and no longer bitter. It’s finally sweet to have won.

“It was all a long time ago,” he said. “A lot of bridges have been crossed. The entire country has come a long way in the way people think. Tomorrow night, I’m going to start my best five, regardless. And that’s what I was doing then.”

Brian Woolsey is a feature writer for the Dallas Morning News, a novelist and non-fiction author. A 1988 alumus of TWC, his most recent book, The Edge of the West and Other Texas Stories, was published by Texas Western Press. He resides in Dallas.

Don Haskins and Bobby Joe Hill.

Wille Cager (top) and Nevil Sheid (bottom) with fans at Sunland Park Mall, El Paso, during UTEP’s celebration of the NCAA 1960 Championship game.

Far left: Student Trainer Fred Swarack, Tego Ratley, David Patillo, Dick Myers, David Lattin, Harry Flournoy.