Loyola wins 'Game of Change' reprise 59-51

By Fred Mitchell
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As former players from the famed 1963 Loyola and Mississippi State teams watched from the stands at Gentile Arena, the 2012 versions of the two reprised that historic battle Saturday night.

"This is a great, great feeling. And the main reason why is because (the opponent) is Mississippi State," said Jerry Harkness, the All-American captain of the Ramblers' NCAA tournament champion.

Loyola won the particularly spirited and physical contest 59-51 before a crowd of 3,321.

Eerily, the score was only two points off the final of that NCAA Mideast Regional tournament semifinal that the Ramblers won 61-51.

"That means that in 50 years of basketball, we haven't learned how to play offense yet," first-year Mississippi State coach Rick Ray quipped.

Ray is the first African-American basketball coach at the school that defied its state's unwritten law then to play an integrated team.

The '63 Ramblers had four African-American starters: Harkness, Vic Rouse, Les Hunter and Ron Miller. Johnny Egan was the team's point guard.

The SEC-champion Bulldogs were an all-white team at a time when schools in the segregated South didn't play integrated teams.

Saturday night, the Ramblers went on a 20-0 run late in the first half to take a 34-20 lead at the intermission. Freshman Devon Turk led them with a season-high 21 points, including five 3-pointers. Mississippi State got 14 points from Fred Thomas and 13 from Roquez Johnson.

"I was proud to be part of this kind of game," Loyola coach Porter Moser said. "I want to give so much credit to Mississippi State and Rick Ray. I said: 'Rick, we have to play this game. This game has got to happen.'"
The players in this game were born in the '90s, but tried to grasp the historical significance of its predecessor after hearing their respective coaches lecture them over the past several months.

"A (regular-season) game like this 51 years ago wouldn't have been possible," Loyola senior Ben Averkamp said.

During a halftime ceremony, members of the '63 Loyola and Mississippi State teams were recognized.

That historic game since has been dubbed "The Game of Change" because of its impact on integration in the South, particularly in college basketball.

"I don't think anyone on our team gave any thought (in '63) to the social issues," former Mississippi State guard Larry Lee said. "We were kids. We were just gym rats who looked forward to the game."

Former Bulldogs center Bobby Shows agreed.

"We didn't know that the game was that important," Shows said. "We wanted to play in the NCAA (tournament), and that was important. But to see the reaction of the media and others (after the '63 game against Loyola) if this doesn't get carried down to the next generation, this historical event will be gone. We're just hoping that the younger generation will pick it up."