Loyola to celebrate 50th anniversary of title

By Scott Powers
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Loyola is set to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Ramblers’ 1963 NCAA tournament championship, which has remained the lone title by a team from Illinois.

Loyola will honor players from the 1962-63 team during Saturday’s game against Illinois-Chicago. Former players John Egan, Jerry Harkness, Les Hunter, Ron Miller, Don Connaughton and Rich Rochelle are expected to be in attendance.

The Ramblers won their first 20 games in the 1962-63 season and went 24-2 in the regular season. They defeated Tennessee Tech by 69 points in the NCAA tournament’s opening round, Mississippi State in the second round, Illinois in the quarterfinals, Duke in the semifinals and came back from 15 points to defeat Cincinnati in overtime of the title game. Vic Rouse scored the game-winning basket when he tipped in a rebound at the buzzer.

“We’re 50 years away and the visions of that year jump through your mind,” the 72-year-old Harkness said by phone on Friday. “To see him tap that back, you don’t know at first. You’re thinking, ‘We still got a few seconds to go. Then all of a sudden, you see people running together. I ran toward the pile, too. That stays with you. It really does.”

Harkness and his teammates have found in recent years their title has actually grown in stature since they won it 50 years ago. When they played Cincinnati, the game was televised, but it was on tape delay.

The NCAA tournament and its Final Four are obviously a bigger deal today.

“All the interest in the tournament now, I don’t think there was that kind of interest then,” the 70-year-old Egan said by phone on Friday. “I don’t think it was as important to win as it is today. I find it very interesting. I think the importance has changed to what it means to have won. It’s enhanced.”

The fact no other Illinois team has ever captured a NCAA men’s basketball tournament title has also helped Loyola’s 1963 squad.

The state has had a couple teams come close. Bradley lost in the title game in 1950 and 1954. Illinois lost in the championship in 2005 and has been to five Final Fours. DePaul lost in the tournament semifinals in 1943 and 1979.
“We’re the only one; that’s shocking,” Harkness said. “It really is when you consider all of the
great basketball players to come out of Illinois, especially in the Chicago area. They’ve had some
truly outstanding players. It’s surprising that hasn’t happened. I’m kind of a little bit happy
because you like to hold on to something like a record like that.”

This weekend will mark the fourth time the team has reassembled for an event in the past 50
years. They previously came together for the 25th anniversary, when they were inducted into the
school’s Hall of Fame and for when Loyola and Mississippi State celebrated the 50th anniversary
of their historic game on Dec. 15, 2012.

The Mississippi State game is considered one of the stepping stones for the civil rights
movement. Mississippi State defied a state injunction which prohibited it from playing against a
team with a largely African-American roster.

“I think the Mississippi State game, not necessarily the wins, but the game itself, makes the title
so much sweeter,” Harkness said. “Matter of fact, I’ve picked the Mississippi State game to be
the biggest game in my life, bigger than the national title. Playing a little role in the advancement
of the civil rights movement, that’s been the key and most important game in my life.”

That game, along with many others, is sure to be among the former teammates’ topics of
conversation this weekend. Egan said it’s a group that truly enjoys each other’s company.

“I think as a result of the years that have passed, the players have actually grown closer than
when we were playing,” Egan said. “Maybe we know each other better. We no longer have that
part in common -- playing. Whenever we have come together, it’s been nice. It’s something I
never thought we would have experienced. The championship has been a great deal to us.”