A Final and a Beginning

By Michael Lenehan
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Fifty years ago, as the 25th N.C.A.A. men’s final began at Freedom Hall in Louisville, Ky., basketball fans saw for the first time something they take for granted today. As the two top men’s teams in the country, Loyola of Chicago and Cincinnati, prepared for the opening tip, most of the players on the floor, 7 of 10, were black.

Looking back, one of those players, Tom Thacker of Cincinnati, summed up the significance: “You tune in the television and you see seven black guys, and you’re a black high school ballplayer in Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky or wherever, your eyes pop out. You’re going to stay tuned.”

It was the height of the civil rights movement. A few months before the tournament, James Meredith enrolled at Mississippi, which led to rioting. President John F. Kennedy called out 30,000 federal troops — more than in the surge in Iraq — to restore order. A few months after the tournament, a bomb exploded in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., killing four black girls.

All-black colleges were not yet welcome in the N.C.A.A. tournament. Coaches at overwhelmingly white universities — in other words, most coaches — were squeamish about the number of black faces in their team photographs. They joked among themselves that they could play one black player on the road, two at home, three if they were way behind.

But the Bearcats, the favorites in the 1963 final, had three black starters (and four the previous season). They were hoping to become the first team to win three consecutive national titles.

They faced the Ramblers of Loyola, a Jesuit school that had never been to the tournament. They had four black starters. Earlier in the season, when their lone white starter was ejected from a game, they became the first major college team to have five blacks on the floor at once.

In the final, Loyola staged one of the most surprising comebacks in tournament history. Trailing by 15 points with less than 12 minutes to go — a deep hole in the days before the shot clock and the 3-point line — the Ramblers clawed their way back and tied the game in the last seconds of regulation. They won, 60-58, with a buzzer-beater at the end of overtime.

The Bearcats had defeated two all-white teams on their way to the final. The Ramblers defeated three, including Mississippi State, which defied a court injunction against playing an integrated team. During the regular season, the players on both teams had endured prejudice and
humiliation: awkward moments in restaurants and hotel lobbies; hostile crowds hurling garbage and abuse; social isolation on their own campuses.

Jerry Harkness, Loyola’s star and captain, felt pressure from two sides, from the characters who sent him hate mail signed “KKK” and from the neighborhoods and churches of black Chicago. “We were winning, we were four blacks, and boy, the black community was excited about us,” Harkness said. “We go to a dance: ‘Man you guys are great, you can’t lose now. Please don’t lose.’”

The mood was different in Cincinnati. George Wilson, the Bearcats’ center, said he did not realize his team was unusual until the 1966 tournament final, when an all-black team from Texas Western defeated Adolph Rupp and all-white Kentucky. “We never thought about it,” Wilson said. “Seriously. Only time I thought about it was when they mentioned Texas Western starting five.”

Loyola’s Ron Miller, who like Harkness grew up in New York, became the Ramblers’ fourth black starter in the last game of the 1961-62 season. Before that, he was getting a lot of playing time and scoring well, but Coach George Ireland was reluctant to give him the spot. Ireland pulled him aside one day and tried to explain. “It was code, totally code,” Miller said. “I cannot play you and you know why. I don’t even think he said, ‘You know why.’ Because I knew why. And I didn’t even think of making a stink about it or being upset. You know, that’s just how it was and you accepted how it was.”

Miller was too young to understand the full significance of the title. An elder explain explained it to him when he went home to the South Bronx afterward. He had become a neighborhood celebrity. He recalled: “I remember leaving the door open so people could come in, because they kept knocking on the door: Ronnie? Is Ronnie here? And then at some point I go over and see Ernie Copeland. He had the store on the corner, and I used to stock shelves for him and stuff like that. People in the neighborhood were coming up to me and saying hi and talking to me as I walked over to see him.

“And when I got in the store, I remember him saying, ‘I can’t tell you how proud I am of you and the fact that you had’ — and this is the way he said it — ‘you had all those Negroes on that team. I was really proud to see that.’ And I think that was the first time I realized people thought of it like that.”

Fifty years later, after children and grandchildren and a successful career in business, Miller understands how the game might have looked to, say, a college coach, and how it might fit into a bigger picture. “I guess when you break it down, your championship game, you’ve got seven blacks on the court, that’s like wow, things are changing,” he said. “Maybe Adolph Rupp is not going to run
out and get a black player at Kentucky, but the guy in Iowa, or the guy in Minnesota, or the guy at Marquette thinks, I can recruit a few of those players now.

“That’s why the ’60s were so great. That’s why the whole movement was so important. You don’t have to accept things anymore. All those little changes. All those nos becoming yeses.”