

Western Kentucky's 1971 Final Four team still in the hearts of Hilltopper fans 50 years later

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# Western Kentucky's 1971 Final Four team still in the hearts of Hilltopper fans 50 years later

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**I**n 1966, an all-Black starting lineup from Texas Western College (now known as the University of Texas at El Paso) defeated an all-white University of Kentucky team 72-65 in the national championship.

In Adolph Rupp's reign as head coach at UK, it wasn't until three years after that title game loss and nearing the end of his 42-year coaching career did he have a Black player on the roster — Tom Payne.

**More:** [Why did it take so long for Adolph Rupp to sign a Black player? Listen to his explanation](#)

Though there were some questions about it, Rupp did recruit Black players. Some notable ones were Wes Unseld and Butch Beard, who instead signed with the University of Louisville.

The former UK coach also sought the talents of a player from Scottsville, Kentucky. He was averaging nearly 40 points per game as a senior at Allen County-Scottsville High School in 1967.

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"I never felt that warm and fuzzy feeling up there and I did not want to be the first African-American to go up there," McDaniels told the WKU College

Heights Herald in 2014. "I grew up around the red towel and Diddle and I just knew one day if I ever got good enough to play ball, I'd want to go to Western Kentucky and be a Hilltopper. It was already in my DNA."

"My dad was an All-American. He could've went to UCLA, he could've went to big, big schools, but he stayed local," McDaniels' son, Eskias McDaniels said.

**"I grew up around the red towel and Diddle and I just knew one day if I ever got good enough to play ball, I'd want to go to Western Kentucky and be a Hilltopper. It was already in my DNA."**

Jim McDaniels, former Western Kentucky basketball star



Jim McDaniels' Western Kentucky jersey

ESKIAS MCDANIELS

WKU was already integrated before McDaniels arrived. Clem Haskins and Dwight Smith were the first Black athletes to join the program in 1963 after being heavily recruited by E.A. Diddle.

John Oldham followed the legendary Hilltopper coach the following year and continued to recruit Black players. While recruiting was a heavy emphasis for Oldham and his staff, McDaniels did most of it for them.

## The five best players they had

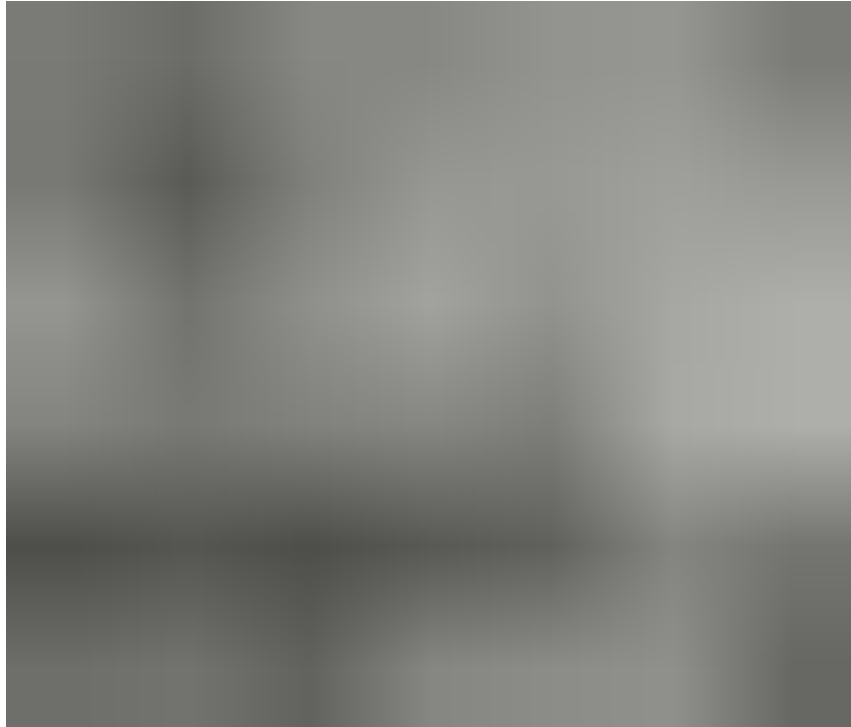
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It all started at the Brown Hotel at the Kentucky All-Star game in Louisville in 1967.

McDaniels shared a room with Horse Cave star Clarence Glover.

Louisville native Jerome Perry and Hazard resident Jim Rose were also playing in the game.

McDaniels thought about it: What would Western Kentucky basketball look like if these guys played together?



The all-Black starting five of the Western Kentucky men's basketball team that went to the Final Four in 1971. From left to right: Rex Bailey, Clarence...

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WKU ATHLETICS

"When he thought of it at the All-Star game, if we could all go to the same university, I bet we could win the national championship," Glover said.

It took a little time before it all came together. Glover was originally going to Florida State and Rose was heading to Houston.

Eventually they all flipped to join who they called "Big Mac" and made the short drive to Bowling Green.

Not only did Oldham have Black players on the WKU roster, they were in the starting lineup.

Fast forward four years later to 1971, with McDaniels, Glover, Rose, Rex Bailey and Jerry Dunn both from Glasgow joining, this became the first Black starting five in the state's history. Even more remarkable, they were all Kentucky natives.

This decision didn't come without criticism, though.

Oldham received death threats. Members of the WKU Board of Regents left the board. Coach kept this away from the players, though.

He famously said, "That's the five best players I've got."

But it wasn't just about basketball for Oldham.

"Coach O will always have a special spot in my heart," Bailey said. "At the

time, it didn't seem like he looked at the color. He looked at the best players that he had and he put them on the floor.

"Even after I played my last year, I got married and went to work and I cut my finger off, and I needed a place to live. He talked to the dean of housing and got me a real nice apartment on campus and got me a scholarship to go back and get my degree."

**"At the time, it didn't seem like he looked at the color. He looked at the best players that he had and he put them on the floor."**

Rex Bailey, former WKU star

This team had Black players and talented white players that Glover described as the "glue that keeps the team together." While the Hilltoppers weren't appreciated by everyone in college basketball in those days, they reached heights that have never been duplicated in WKU history.

In 1971, this team finished the year 24-6, won the Ohio Valley Conference championship and went to the NCAA Tournament where they beat Jacksonville, Kentucky, Ohio State and Kansas to reach the lone Final Four in program history — with some memorable moments along the way.

## 'Look at C!'

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Jacksonville, led by one of the all-time greats, Artis Gilmore, awaited the Hilltoppers in Freedom Hall in Louisville for the first-round game.

"We were riding up on the bus and 'Mac' (McDaniels) and I were sitting together, and he always called me 'Son,'" former teammate Gary Sundmacker remembered. "He said, 'Son, I'm ready tonight.'"

McDaniels finished with a game-high 23 points and 13 rebounds that night, but all it took was two points from one of his teammates to get the win.

The game was tied at 72 with six seconds left on the clock. Jacksonville's Ernie Fleming was called for a double-dribble in the backcourt and turned the ball over to WKU in its own territory. His teammates went toward him to console him after the blunder. Fleming was noticeably upset.

WKU had possession now with a chance to win. Sundmacker was set to inbound the ball from the hashmark in front of the Hilltoppers' bench.

"It was a hurry-up situation. McDaniels and Rose were options. Clarence wasn't really in the play and he wasn't the first, second or third option," Sundmacker said with a laugh. "I'm thinking those options were not options, I'm going to eat this ball and get the five-second call."

"But someone on the bench called, 'Look at C! Look at C!'"

Glover was on the far end away from the inbounder, just feet away from the opposite low post, on one knee and faked as if he was tying his shoe. With no

one guarding him, Sundmacker threw the inbounds pass near the basket and right into the hands of Glover to lay it in and win the game, 74-72.

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“This was very quickly calculated because I was on the other end of the basketball court covering Artis Gilmore,” Glover said. “I just calmly went down the opposite side (after Fleming double-dribbled).

“I just knelt down and made sure I didn’t touch my shoes because if an official saw me he may think it was an equipment timeout. So, I didn’t touch my shoes, I just knelt down and watched.”

## On to round two

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Following that game was a highly anticipated match against Kentucky, the first between the two instate schools. The game didn’t live up to the hype as the Hilltoppers crushed the Wildcats 107-83.

McDaniels was unstoppable with a game-high 35 points and 11 rebounds. Rose added 25. Glover poured in a game-high 17 rebounds to go with 18 points.

It was the most points the Wildcats allowed all season.

Bailey recalled after the game, “We were hooting and hollering, and we wanted to go and congratulate the guys. Two teams from the same state. We

go to congratulate them, and they didn't want us in the locker room. We were heading back up the hallway and Coach Rupp says, 'Oh by God, let them in there. If we played them five times, we'd beat them three out of the five.' We looked at him and thought, 'Yeah, right.'

"We walk in and the only person crying was Tom Payne. The rest of the guys were in there with their heads down."

## **The bittersweet end to a historic run** \_\_\_\_\_

In the Mideast Regional Final, much like the opening game, WKU found itself clawing back from a deficit to win. Trailing by 18, they rallied past Ohio State in overtime 81-78. Next, it was Villanova in the Final Four for a chance to advance to the national championship.

They had their chances to win. Dunn missed a bonus free throw at the end of regulation that sent the game into overtime. Glover had a shot at an easy layup in overtime that could've given WKU the win, but he missed. Then McDaniels fouled out in double overtime and that did it.

A 92-89 final score costed the Tops a shot at a national title. The memorable season ended with a 77-75 win over Kansas in the National Third Place game. Villanova went on to fall to UCLA 68-62 in the championship.

Proud of the run, but 50 years later, Bailey said it still stings.

"We felt in our hearts we could've beat UCLA," Bailey said about the eventual national champion. "We didn't have a thing to lose and they had their reputation that they had and everything."



In a March 26, 1971, Courier Journal article, Western Kentucky falls to Villanova in the Final Four.

PHOTO PROVIDED

That final game was a happy, yet sad experience for the team. It was the end of an era.

Oldham chose to step down as coach after that season and became athletic director at WKU where he remained until he retired in 1986.

McDaniels was the No. 1 overall pick in the ABA Draft and for seven years bounced between ABA and NBA teams, including the Los Angeles Lakers and Kentucky Colonels. He eventually retired in 1978.



Head coach John Oldham spoke after Western Kentucky University's overtime victory over Ohio State to advance to the Final Four of the 1971 NCAA Tournament.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WKU ATHLETICS

Glover was the 10th overall pick in the NBA Draft and went to the Boston Celtics. After a brief stint there, he went into education and had a lengthy career in administration.

**“I mentioned to one of the (university's athletic directors) one time when we were down there for the (45-year reunion) and I told them, ‘You need to put this whole team in the hall of fame. We’re dying off and give us our flowers now.’”**

Rex Bailey

Rose was drafted with the 28th overall pick in the NBA Draft by the Boston Celtics, although he never appeared in a regular-season game.

While the Final Four appearance was later vacated due to NCAA investigations that said McDaniels signed a professional contract and accepted money during the season, the season was never vacated in the eyes of Hilltopper fans.

No other team in program history has made it further than the Sweet 16.

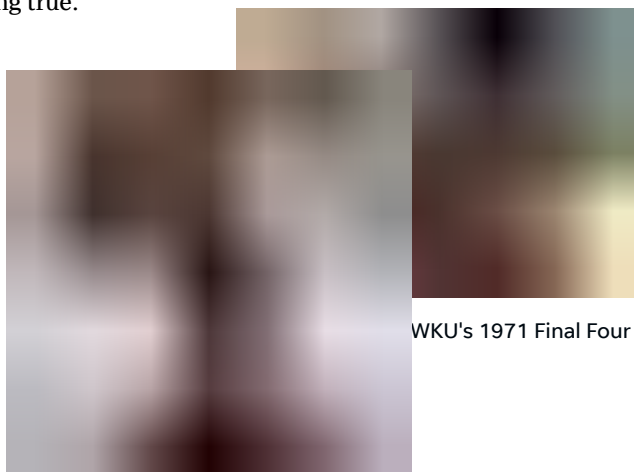
“It was an amazing experience. It was a thrill,” Sundmacker said. “People I still run into now, 50 years later, I play a bunch of golf and I talk to people and they say, ‘I remember your name,’ and it’s amazing to me.”

“I mentioned to one of the (university's athletic directors) one time when we were down there for the (45-year reunion) and I told them, ‘You need to put this whole team in the hall of fame. We’re dying off and give us our flowers now,’” Bailey said.



Five years later, Bailey's wish is coming true.

In honor of the 50-year anniversary of this Final Four season, this team is set to be inducted into the Western Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame this year. It will be bittersweet in more ways than one. Not only will COVID-19 affect the ceremony and it will likely be postponed until it's safe for everyone to be together, per Glover, they will also be without some notable members.



WKU's 1971 Final Four

Jim McDaniels' grandson holding a basketball with the jersey's of his grandfather and his dad, Eskias, behind him.

ESKIAS MCDANIELS

Oldham passed away this past Nov. at 97. McDaniels died in 2017 at 69, due to complications from diabetes. Rose passed in 2009 at 62.

"My son, his grandson, was born nine months after he passed away so they didn't get to meet, so I'm trying to keep a lot of these memories," McDaniels son, Eskias McDaniels, said.

"First and foremost, whenever someone asked him about where he played at, he always said first Western. He never said the Lakers first or the Sonics or Italy, it was always, 'I'm a Hilltopper.' That meant a lot."

Though it all, the team plans to remember the good times and wish for more to come.

"At one point, I thought another (WKU) team might make it to the Final Four and we were always hoping that," Glover said. "Although you don't want someone to beat your record in a certain way, but in this particular instance it was that we wanted the university to win a national championship."

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