

This would be a fine volume for history or sociology of sport classes, but can stand alone as an excellent, contemporary case study examination of college basketball in the mid-1960s.

—MURRY NELSON  
*Penn State University*

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NELLI, BERT AND STEVE NELLI. *The Winning Tradition: A History of Kentucky Wildcat Basketball* (2d ed.). Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. Illustrated. Statistics, bibliographic note, index. Pp. x + 276. \$24.95 cb.

From the cover, *The Winning Tradition* looks much like any of the countless glowingly formulaic treatments of college sports teams that fill bookstores in college towns from one coast to the other. On the front, a clean-cut Kentucky player rises above a Duke defender, launching a one-handed effort that seems destined for the basket (a jacket caption assures the reader that the shot did indeed go in). On the back, Coach Tubby Smith holds aloft the 1998 NCAA championship trophy, smiling in delight as a dozen hands, both black and white, reach out to caress it. The jacket copy proclaims that “Coaches and players come and go, but at the University of Kentucky, two things remain: the fans and the Winning Tradition.”

These images, however, belie the complexity of the stories that lie inside. Along with vintage photos, effusive descriptions, and blow-by-blow accounts of seasons good and bad, Bert and Steve Nelli paint a detailed picture of the corrosive pressures that seem inevitably to develop around big-time college athletic programs, problems that so often disappear beneath celebratory rhetoric of courage and competitive drive.

The *Winning Tradition* covers the entire history of Kentucky basketball, starting in the years when college basketball was merely a pale shadow of college football, and continuing through the national championships won in 1948, 1949, 1951, 1958, 1978, 1996 and 1998—achievements that helped to make Kentucky basketball, in the words of Tubby Smith, into “a way of life” (246). Many of the stories will be of interest largely to true-blue Kentucky fans; for example, most people outside the state will probably remain unmoved by a lengthy discussion of efforts made by the University of Louisville to get UK to drop its policy against playing instate teams. Still, the national significance of the Kentucky program and the often-vivid details the authors include should draw in a broader range of college basketball’s students and fans.

The central figure of the work, as in Kentucky basketball history, is Adolph Rupp, the brilliant and controversial coach who helped bring the Wildcats to national prominence, and whose legacy effects the program—and college basketball—to this day. Rupp coached the Wildcats from 1930 to 1972, garnering more wins than any coach before him, and the book presents him as both a hard-driving tyrant and a brilliant self-promoter in the mold of Knute Rockne. The account of Rupp’s career draws on an impressive number of interviews with former players and colleagues, providing ample evidence of Rupp’s talent and drive, while making little effort to whitewash his shortcomings. A lengthy account of the

“golden decades” of 1933-54, when the Wildcats dominated national competition, is followed by an equally detailed chronicle of the trials Rupp and his teams endured throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, when Rupp’s health problems, the growing popularity of college basketball at other schools, and a stubborn refusal to recruit African American players led to a long series of lackluster seasons for the Wildcats. The authors do a particularly good job of capturing Rupp’s fiery style, with many telling details from individual recollections. In one particularly vivid paragraph, for example, they recount the “deafening” silence in which UK practices were conducted, a silence punctuated only by Rupp’s demanding and often sarcastic critiques. “Why should boys constantly chatter in a class in basketball any more than they do in a class in English?” they quote Rupp as explaining. “Why should they whistle and sing? If you let ‘em talk and wisecrack around, they don’t concentrate. I tell the boys if they want to talk, we’ve got a student union for visiting purposes. And if they want to whistle, well there’s a music academy too” (39). The authors chart the impressive results of this dictatorial approach, but avoid romanticizing it; one of the first stories in the book involves the troubled career of a young man named Bill Cassady, a talented small-town Kentucky boy whose dream of playing for the Wildcats turned sour when he was “beaten down” by Rupp’s relentless criticism (5).

*The Winning Tradition* also gives detailed coverage to the seasons that followed Rupp’s retirement, a narrative that encompasses both changes and continuities. The most dramatic change, of course, involved the program’s belated embrace of African American players, who would help fuel many of Kentucky’s later achievements. Other aspects of the program, both good and bad, would see fewer shifts. The Nellis spend considerable time recounting the accomplishments of Joe Hall, Rupp’s successor, who was never able to escape the Baron’s shadow despite becoming one of the country’s most successful coaches. But the narrative also makes clear that Hall’s hard-edged style, which was much in Rupp’s mold, could cause the same problems for players that Bill Cassady endured. At the same time, Hall and his successors had to cope with ever-growing pressures to win, and triumphs such as the 1978 championship contrast with a seemingly endless stream of investigations and scandals, culminating in the NCAA probation imposed in 1988. The book is something of a hybrid, attempting to provide both an exhaustive account of every Kentucky season and to offer a broader analysis of key events. This mix, however, tends to undercut the analytical efforts, both in the case of Rupp, whose portrait emerges in bits and pieces, and in the program’s history itself. Like many college basketball fans, who loudly bemoan commercialization, recruiting violations and athlete misbehavior, but who follow their teams with seemingly endless enthusiasm, the Nellis clearly have difficulty reconciling the promise and the problems of big-time sport. Their focus on chronology produces not a coherent assessment of pressures and achievements, of the price paid for Kentucky’s vaunted fame, but rather a narrative that juxtaposes good and bad while making few attempts to explore the connections between them. Such an approach lays bare the troubling complexities inherent in big-time college sports. But it raises far more questions than it answers, leaving a more-searching examination of such issues to future endeavors.

—PAMELA GRUNDY  
*Charlotte, North Carolina*