

The Man in the Brown Suit

A Stranger in a Strange Land

Following the 1930 season at Freeport, Rupp invited the coach at the University of Illinois, Craig Ruby, to be the banquet speaker. [At this time, there was a virtual pipeline of assistants from Illinois to UK, including Bernie Shively, who had blocked for the legendary Red Grange just a few years before – the football coach, Harry Gamage was an Illinois man too.] Ruby told Rupp that Johnny Mauer was thinking of leaving Lexington. Rupp asked Ruby if we mind putting in a recommendation. Ruby replied that he would be glad to do so.¹

Soon after Rupp had a telegram from UK. Several weeks later, he made his first trip to the Bluegrass.

Rupp would recall of his first trip in Lexington from the depot to campus, “I wasn’t too much too much impressed with the job.” Meeting with the members of the Athletic Council, they assembled for a lunch in nearby McVey Hall.

Rupp was running late and by the time he arrived, all he had to eat was a piece of cod (cold) and some cornbread. He thought to himself that the people in Kentucky didn’t seem to be “eating too well.”

It didn’t get better when Rupp looked out the window. Near where Memorial Coliseum on Euclid Avenue now stands (an area known as Pralltown), he saw a slum of some fifty shanty homes.² The basketball gym wasn’t much better – Rupp thought of it as a “little ole peanut huller” that was inferior even to the facilities at Freeport.

The Kentucky job paid \$2,800 a year, which was exactly what Rupp made in Freeport. Returning home, the reasons were

¹In his interviews 44 years later with Russell Rice, Rupp would recall incorrectly that he met with Ruby after the 1929 season in which Freeport finished third in the state tournament. Rupp was hired after the 1930 season.

²Frank Fitzpatrick wrote in *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 97, that Rupp referred to the slum as containing “nigger shacks.”

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legion for him to stay and continue coaching the Freeport Pretzels.

Rupp was ambitious and just that year, he'd earned a Masters degree and his principal certificate. His future in education was bright, Rupp knowing that it was the administrators that got the most pay. The sitting principal at Freeport, L.A. Fulwider, laid it on thick to retain Rupp, telling him he had "a lifetime job."

Fulwider also encouraged Rupp to go into town and meet with various bigwigs. They too were in on the sales job (Rupp would only learn this later), the pitch being that there was no reason to go to Kentucky. Rupp was told, "Whoever heard of Kentucky doing anything?"

It was persuasive. Freeport was a thriving town and Kentucky was just "hillbilly country."

There was other matter of Rupp's girlfriend, pretty Esther Schmidt – while living in Freeport (and considered very popular), Esther hailed from a prominent pioneer family in nearby Forreston, IL. She was a keeper for a serious type like Rupp – she didn't seem to mind at all when on dates, he'd diagram basketball plays on napkins.

Ten days after Rupp's interview in Lexington, the time for decision had come – although some 70 were interviewed for the job, Kentucky had selected the young (he was just 29) Kansan transplanted to Illinois. Following his interview, the council had been well sold by Rupp's "manner and refreshing approach to basketball."

Key in directing the council was a freshman athlete, Ellis Johnson. While it was rare for a freshman to sit on the council (as the student representative) and much less so to have actively participated, Johnson was no ordinary freshman. He was in fact a high school All-American in football and basketball at Ashland (KY) High and to date, the greatest athlete ever signed by UK.

But why had Kentucky chosen Rupp? Besides making a good impression in his interview and having an excellent record in Freeport, Rupp had two key connections. The first was the pipeline from the University of Illinois, Coach Ruby recommending Rupp. He also had advocates in none other than

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two of basketball's giants of the day, both from Kansas, Phog Allen and James Naismith.

It also can't be understated that in answering why an obscure high school coach could be elevated to the head position at Kentucky in 1930, is that head job at UK was not a significant post. Kentucky had little basketball history (a 1921 Southern Championship and not much more) and its coach was expected to be a jack-of-all-trades. Rupp's two-year deal provided that he would not just manage the cagers, but also coach the track team (Shively would be his assistant) and serve as an assistant football coach. Basketball coach as profession was still nascent and in Lexington, where football was king, it was decidedly a second-class position. That's not that Lexingtonians didn't like basketball – they just didn't live and breathe it.

In the context then of 1930, offering Rupp the job was perfectly sensible. He was cheaper than the departing Johnny Mauer and what was really at stake? It was just basketball right? Indeed it was, but not for long.

Rupp debated the decision for three days without replying. After receiving a call from Lexington, the moment of decision had arrived. UK wanted him to wire its decision.

For the second time in his life, the first being eleven years later when he'd stayed on the train and shunned Emporia, Rupp was again at a critical crossroads. Everything rested on the decision. The safe choice for Rupp would have been to stay in Freeport – would have advanced and likely become a successful principal at the high school. He might even have gone on to Illinois and become a professor. His future in Freeport was certain. Perhaps not legend, but successful nonetheless, far exceeding his humble Halstead roots.

But Rupp was not yet settled.

As Rupp headed through Freeport, the decision weighing on him, he saw Red Greb, the proprietor of a Conoco gas station who was hanging a sign. Greb had less prestige than the Freeport wheelers and dealers who had tried to persuade the young coach.

Greb told Rupp as he came down from his ladder, "If you don't make it down there, you'll always find a job with all the

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degrees and savvy you've got. You'll never get a chance to coach at another university. I'll tell you one thing."

Grebb continued, "You take that job."

Rupp wired Lexington and accepted – the principal at Freeport was none too happy and in a remarkably inaccurate presage, he told Rupp, "You made an awful mistake."

Rupp finished the school year at Freeport (his term ended in June) and wired Daddy Boles to see what could be done for the summer. As there was no recruiting or conditioning or anything else, Boles told Rupp to report in the fall. Rupp spent the summer selling securities and after a few more weeks hunting and fishing at an Indian reservation Wisconsin, he packed his car (and its meager belongings) and headed south.

Pre-season – Johnson and Spicer – Laudeman

See Interview 3 and 4, Big Blue, 85,

Baron, p. 19, Before Big Blue

See 4 at p. 11-12

Bronston interview

After a grueling pre-season, at least for its time, Rupp coached his first basketball game in Lexington on December 18, 1930. The opponent for an 8.00 p.m. tip-off was from nearby Georgetown (KY) College and it was led by its sophomore captain Harry Lancaster – Lancaster would later become Rupp's right-hand man and top assistant for a generation.

Not much was expected of the Wildcats who were without

stand-outs from the 1930 season, including Lawrence McGinnis, Paul McBrayer, Pisgah Combs and Spooks Millward. Two days before the match-up, Kentucky scrimmaged Transylvania in what was called a "light work-out." Already local cage fans were had been pumped by the local papers, Neville Dunn with the *Lexington Herald* advising that they would see "the much improved and ever fascinating and thrilling fast-break."

Those that saw Rupp in this era always remembered one thing – he was impeccably dressed and supremely confident. It was all an act by Rupp. As he walked into Alumni

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Gymnasium, he felt as if there was lye in his stomach. During games, the feeling would *never* go away for Rupp.

Describe his starting five

Rupp's first game started poorly. On its first possession, Kentucky turned the ball over. Lancaster picked it off for Georgetown and hit their center, Hatcher, who scored first. 2-0 Georgetown. There would later be some debate about who scored first. Lancaster claimed in his book (*Adolph Rupp as I Knew Him*) that he had scored the first basket, Ellis Johnson matching it on the next possession for UK.

Two contemporaneous accounts of the game (filed by Neville Dunn and Brownie Leach for the *Lexington Herald* and *Lexington Leader*, respectively), attributed the first basket to Hatcher (first name unknown), it being Aggie Sale who scored on the next possession to tie the game at 2. Thus if those accounts are to be believed, Sale scored the first bucket of the Rupp era.

Whether he did or not, Georgetown was fouled and Carter hit the free throw. Kentucky stormed back and led 11-4. Georgetown made a second run, Lancaster scoring five to cut the lead to two.

That was as close as Georgetown came all night. UK decimated Georgetown's man-to-man defense and took a 38-13 lead into the break. [While the *Lexington Leader* and *Courier-Journal* called it 38-13, the *Lexington Herald* thought the intermission tally was 38-9.] Whatever the score, Rupp and his quintet were up big.

The lead was only extended in the second half, Kentucky rolling to a 67-19 victory. Rupp cleared the bench and played 17 of his 19 players. However that clearing occurred in the second half, Rupp only substituting once in the first half. Sale had played well, scoring 19 to lead the Wildcats and matching Georgetown's total. In defeat, Lancaster led Georgetown with 11 points.

The reviews were good in the local press, Dunn writing for the *Lexington Herald* that Rupp had reintroduced the "fast-break system of basketball." Leach for the *Lexington Leader* remarked that Rupp's "fast-break system of play . . . has potential scoring possibilities." It was certainly a change from Mauer, the

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previous Wildcat coach. In his three years at the helm, no Kentucky team had scored more than 54 points in a game – Rupp in his debut bettered that number by 13.

It was a solid start, but no one in the gym could envision that Rupp would win 875 more games and become the most influential coach of his era.

Rupp took his first team (ten players in all) to Atlanta for the Southern Championship in the last week of February in 1931. A sprawling conference with 23 teams stretching from Maryland to Florida, it included not only present-day ACC and SEC regulars, but also Washington & Lee, VMI and Sewanee. It had been a good year in Lexington for the cagers, Kentucky winning 12 of 14 games, those two losses being tough ones on the road at Clemson and Georgia.

But at the Southern Depot on the way out of town as the Wildcats were to board a train, the team met Rupp's sharp tongue. Several of the players came dressed in sweatshirts and knickers which were the style of the time.

Rupp who was adorned in a pressed suit (brown of course) and polished shoes was unimpressed with the ragged appearance of his team.

He chastised them, "Boys, what in the name of the Lord are you guys showing up here for in clothes like that?" Rupp continued that "I'm taking a bunch of university students, not a bunch of bums."

"You've got time to go home and get your clothes on. I want you to get on a shirt and I want you get on a tie and a coat and I want you back here. Get out of that fool stuff and let's get some class to this team." Everyone changed and everyone made the southbound train.

Arriving in Atlanta the team stayed at the first class Georgian Terrace. Then just twenty years old, it was already the grand dame of Atlanta society.³ And it looked plenty good to the Kentucky boys. The next week back in Lexington, the UK

³Just eight years later, the Georgian Terrace would host the premiere of *Gone With The Wind*.

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Athletic Director Daddy Boles called Rupp to the carpet.

A bill had arrived from the Georgian Terrace for some \$400 – apparently the young Wildcats had helped themselves to sheets, blankets, towels, silverware and most anything that wasn't tied down. Rupp called in his team and told them it was a bad practice and he wouldn't tolerate it. If it happened again, he promised players would be dismissed. The next day in his office, every item was returned. Rupp boxed it up and shipped it back to the Georgian.

But it was the gym that mattered, not the hotel and the silverware. And what a gym it was in downtown Atlanta. Known as the Auditorium and Armory, the 1909 structure that had been dedicated by President-elect Taft, was a building not designed for basketball and was actually ill-suited for that purpose.

The underlying slab was built at a pronounced slant and to compensate, a temporary wooden floor was hastily constructed. At one point during the tournament, a board broke loose and the game had to be stopped so the floor could be repaired. Whatever the quality of the floor, sixteen of the south's finest would go at it.

The day before the tournament began, the Kentucky squad took its paces at a practice on the flimsy floor. The third-seeded Wildcats would begin play Friday night at 7:00 p.m. against North Carolina State.

Employing a fast-break offense, Kentucky led all the way in defeating the Wolf Pack 33-28, setting up a quarterfinal match with Duke. Yates, who was suffering from a so-called "heavy cold" showed no ill effects and played well throughout. In fact, not only did Yates go forty minutes, but not a substitution was made by Rupp the whole night, Spicer, Yates, McGinnis, Bronston and Worthington going the whole way. This was expected to cause problems for UK against Duke the next day as its coach had used his starters only sparingly in dispatching Clemson.

That concern was illusory and while Yates again spent most of the day in bed at the Georgian, Kentucky turned back Duke 35-30 before an overflow crowd. [Immediately after the game, Yates returned to the hotel and was put back to bed.] It

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was Little Mac, who despite his diminutive size, led the way for Kentucky scoring 18 points.

With a day off before the semi-finals on Monday night, Kentucky was still considered to be handicapped by the illness of Yates. The other surprise was that Florida had even advanced that far, the dark horse Gators having won only five of twelve games on the year. There was little need to worry. Kentucky rolled past Florida by the count of 56-35, Spicer pacing the Wildcats with 22 points. In the finals the next night, Kentucky would meet Maryland which had surprised a strong Georgia team.

The Wildcats started slow, not scoring in the game's first seven minutes and falling behind 18-7 at the half. Kentucky had been flummoxed by Maryland's use of a zone defense as later recalled by Louis McGinnis. The team hadn't prepared for the defense (most teams played man-to-man) and it had few answers in the first half. So inept was UK at the beginning that it missed its first 21 shots.

But Kentucky battled back as shots started to fall, it took a 27-25 lead (UK's first of the game) with two minutes to play on a basket by McGinnis – the timekeeper signalled the two minute mark by raising a gun into the air.

Kentucky won the tip and McGinnis was fouled. He missed the shot and Maryland's clever guard and two-time All-American, Louis "Bosey" Berger⁴, quickly tied the game at 27. As the players walked to the center circle for a jump ball, the clock continued to run – Rupp noticed that nearly a quarter of a minute seemed to tick off.

With the clock still running, Berger controlled the tip

⁴Berger's nickname was the subject of confusion for Kentucky writers. Rupp called him Buzzy in an interview but in Tev Laudeman's book, *The Rupp Years*, he refers to Berger as Bozzy. Rupp biographer Russell Rice for his part called Berger both Bozzy and Buzzy in different books.

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and made a spectacular basket from near mid-court.⁵ The final bell rang before there could be another jump at center court and Maryland had pulled out the championship by a 29-27 count.

Rupp would never forget the loss and would forever lament it – while he respected the Maryland team and Berger too, he always questioned the outcome. Spicer, Little Mac and Yates made first team All-Conference – Bronston made the second five.

Rupp was dejected on the way home and was certain the hometown fans in Lexington would be disappointed. He couldn't have been more wrong. In fact as the game had played out, proper Lexington crowded into bars to listen to the score – students populated their favorite hangout, The Lair, to listen to the game. Newspaper offices were inundated with a simple question: Who won?

Daddy Boles knew a crowd was gathering and as the train (The Suwanee River Special) neared Lexington, he told Rupp to shave and look presentable. Rupp didn't believe it, but he cleaned himself up.

Perhaps it was hyperbole but the newspapers reported that it was as if Ancient Rome had celebrated the return of a triumphant Caesar. Despite the unseasonably cold air, a large crowd (estimated at 400) had gathered at the Southern Depot to welcome the Ruppmen.

Included in the crowd was the UK Band directed by the renowned faculty member, Elmer Sulzer. It played “*On, On, U. of K.*” and “*My Old Kentucky Home.*” While a parade had been planned, the poor weather sent the celebration to the Euclid Avenue gymnasium..

Rupp who was publicly gracious in defeat (while still in Atlanta that is) told the partisan crowd his true feeling, “I say that Maryland has the better team – but I don't think it.”

⁵While Kentucky sources called Berger's basket as being made near mid-court, it was described by a present-day Maryland basketball writer as a lay-up that struck the rim and bounced up and back in. Rupp himself called it a shot from mid-court.

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The successful season, capped by a bitter loss, had come to a close. But despite the fatigue of a twelve-hour train ride, when questioned by a reporter, Rupp's first thoughts turned to the next season and his returning players. He was always coaching.

The stranger in a strange land had found a home. Rupp would never leave it.