To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jeffrey J. Storey entitled "Building Basketball Success in Big Orange Country: The Ray Mears Era in Tennessee Basketball." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Human Performance and Sport Studies.

Joan Paul, Major Professor

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Dean of The Graduate School

Building Basketball Success in Big Orange Country: The Ray Mears Era in Tennessee Basketball

A Thesis
Presented for the Master of Science
Degree
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Jeffrey J. Storey
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Abstract

This work focuses on the Ray Mears era as coach in the basketball history at The University of Tennessee, 1962-1978. The description and analysis of this era was the focus of this study. An effort has been made to answer why this era was significant in the history of athletics at the school and to analyze the qualities associated with Ray Mears that allowed this period to be deemed successful. Oral interviews and newspapers were the main sources utilized in the gathering of data. Through the analysis of these sources the conclusion can be drawn that the qualities Mears possessed in the areas of strategy, promotion, preparation, and motivation combined with an intense drive to excel allowed for the development of a successful basketball program during this era at The University of Tennessee.

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Introduction

The Ray Mears' era in Tennessee basketball has never been dealt with in a critical study. Motivated by my interest in basketball in the Southeastern Conference and the history of sport in general I found the topic to be both relevant and interesting. The availability of Ray Mears and other significant people that were associated with this era in Tennessee basketball and their acceptance of the need for a study of this nature allowed for this project to be possible.

Chapter I

Reconstruction

The men's basketball program at the University of Tennessee took a major turn in April of 1962 when a young Ohioan named Ray Mears was hired to coach the team.[1] Over the next 15 years the game of basketball reached new levels at the University of Tennessee. The success enjoyed during this period is a direct result of Ray Mear's involvement with the program.

Coach Mears arrived at Tennessee with a winning record and with a definite philosophy on coaching basketball.[2] These qualities were obvious to the people who hired him, but his motivational tactics, competitiveness, organizational skills, intense drive, and promotional methods were soon to become as evident and well known as his match-up zone defense. The changes and improvements that occurred in Tennessee basketball during his stay transcend won-loss records. Many of the changes he wrought are intangibles such as fan interest and excitement, player-coach relationships, and administrative enthusiasm for basketball. It is the purpose of this study to examine how Ray Mears developed and maintained the consistently successful teams that were fielded during his career at the University of Tennessee. Additionally, I will attempt to describe the innovations associated with the Ray Mears' era at the University of Tennessee and analyze the overall effect his leadership had on Tennessee athletics.

In March of 1962 two of America's collegiate basketball programs were on opposite ends of the spectrum. The Tennessee men's basketball team had just completed a

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[1] Byrd, Ben. *The Basketball Vols, University of Tennessee Basketball. (H*untsville, Alabama: The Strode Publishers, 1974).

[2]Ben Byrd, " Mears, New Vol Cage Coach," *The Knoxville Journal,* 20 April 1962, 11.

lackluster season winning only 4 games while losing 19 under the direction of John Sines. In the state of Ohio, Whittenburg College coached by Ray Mears had recently won the national small college championship. The success of the Whittenburg basketball program and its coach, Ray Mears, was about to have a direct effect on the struggling basketball program at The University of Tennessee. Ray Mears was going to dim the lights on his career at Whittenburg and put the spotlight on a new and promising career at The University of Tennessee.

* * *

John Sines, an assistant basketball coach at Tennessee since 1952, took over the head coaching job after Emmet Lowery resigned in the spring of 1959.[3] Sines' career as the Tennessee basketball coach was not successful. A point shaving scandal involving Tennessee basketball players that occurred while Sines was coach did much to destabilize his coaching position. During Sines' span as head coach two Tennessee players were implicated in the point shaving scandal that cost the team a returning starter for the 1961-62 season. It is difficult to determine the negative effects that the gambling scandal had on the 1961-62 season which ended with Tennessee winning but 4 games and losing 19. Eddie Test, starting guard, admitted he was offered bribes, but did not shave any points or accept any money. He dropped out of school during the investigation and was not allowed to reenroll at the University of Tennessee due to his involvement in the gambling scandal. He was the leading scorer the previous year and would have been counted on heavily had he been able to return. Dick Fisher, another player implicated in the point shaving, had completed his college eligibility and therefore his involvement did not cost the team his

[3] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols.*

services. Regardless, Sines resigned before he was fired in the spring of 1962. Sines stayed in basketball after leaving Tennessee, eventually coaching basketball at Manatee Junior College in Florida.[4]

Determining the exact reasons that Sines was forced to resign is difficult. His lack of success appears to be more influential on the decision to replace Sines than was the gambling scandal. However, the gambling scandal and the lack of success are interrelated. The suspension of Eddie Test for involvement in the gambling scandal left Sines with an inexperienced lineup and a team that struggled to a poor record. Additionally, the negative publicity surrounding the gambling incident was detrimental to the men's basketball program and left The University of Tennessee administrators and athletic department officials with a clear cut mission of renewing a faltering and scandal ridden basketball program. Hiring a new coach with a promising future appeared be an important step towards establishing a new image for Tennessee basketball, and hopefully leading to more successful basketball teams.

With Sines removal The University of Tennessee set about the search for a new basketball coach. The university administration and the local press were becoming anxious for improvements, not only in basketball, but in other sports. Bowden Wyatt was the acting Athletic Director and the head football coach at The University of Tennessee during this period.[5] Knoxville sports columnist Tom Siler believed that Wyatt was feeling pressure to improve the overall athletic program at the university. Wyatt may have sensed a dissatisfaction within the university's administration over the football team's lack of

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[4]Ibid., 127.

[5]Bowden Wyatt was the head football coach at Tennessee from 1955-1962. He served as acting athletic director for a brief time after Robert Neyland's death in March of 1962.

success the last few years. Attempting to divert some of the attention from a mediocre football program, Wyatt sought to improve other sports at Tennessee.[6]

Jim McDonald, an assistant football coach at the University of Tennessee during this era, explains that Wyatt asked him if he knew a qualified candidate for the basketball head coaching position. McDonald, originally from Ohio, was aware of the success Mears was having at Whittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio.[7] Mears had just won the NCAA small college championship and had compiled an excellent won-lost record of 121-23 in six years at Whittenberg College. McDonald recommended Mears for the position and Mears accepted Tennessee's invitation to visit Knoxville to interview for the job.[8] In discussing his hiring, Mears states that he met with McDonald and Wyatt prior to Sines resigning from his position as head coach. According to Mears, he interviewed with Wyatt in April of 1962 in the penthouse of the Howard Johnson Hotel in downtown Knoxville and was offered the head coaching position at that time. However, Mears felt he could not officially accept the position until the Sines situation was resolved.[9]

Within a short time after the visit, Sines resigned and Bowden Wyatt officially offered the head coaching position to Mears who accepted. The University of Tennessee signed Ray Mears to a contract to coach men's basketball in the spring of 1962.[10]

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[6]Tom Siler, "Neyland Still the Boss," *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 14.
[7]Jim McDonald was an assistant football coach at Tennessee from 1955-1962. He was promoted to the position of head football coach for the 1963 season. He was the head coach for only one season and finished the remainder of his career at Tennessee as an assistant athletic director, retiring in 1981.
[8]Jim McDonald, Interview by author, 20 November 1995.
[9]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 1 November 1994.
[10]Ibid

Early Years

Mears grew up in Dover, Ohio where he played high school basketball. A bout with tuberculosis during his sophomore year in high school was responsible for his introduction to coaching at a very young age. Because of the illness his physician would not allow Mears to play basketball during his sophomore year. The head coach asked him to coach the sixth grade team in Dover. Mears recalls his early success with coaching, and that this experience sparked an interest that he pursued throughout his life.[11]

Following graduation from high school, Mears worked in the steel mills around Dover for three years. He saved part of his money during this time and used these savings to pay his way to college. Because of his desire to play college basketball, Mears enrolled at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Mears selected Miami University because some of his friends wanted to go there and for the strong academic reputation associated with the university. His athletic career at Miami was not glamorous. Mears was an undersized guard, but he overcame a lack of size and athletic ability by playing extremely hard. He did not expect a lot of playing time upon his arrival at Miami, but he actually got to play more than he thought he would. A demoralizing blow occurred when a new coach came into the program and dropped Mears and other seniors from the team during his last year at Miami. This experience left Mears with few positive memories of his playing days at Miami of Ohio. However, Mears does recall being influenced by the pride associated with athletics at Miami. Miami had an established and successful football program during the mid-part of this century, notes Mears. During his years at Miami Mears recognized the importance of the pride associated with the university's football program. Additionally, Mears was influenced by Sid Gilliam, Miami's head football coach at this time. Mears

[11]Ibid

describes Gilliam as being an excellent motivator. Mears would go into the football lockerroom following games and practices and note the motivational remarks Gilliam had left on the chalk board.[12]

Mears love of basketball was not diminished by his experience at Miami, and upon graduation from college he accepted a high school coaching and teaching position at Cadiz, Ohio. The stay at Cadiz was only for a year, but it left an indelible mark on Ray Mears. The small Ohio town had been the birthplace of General George Custer. Custer, the former United States Calvary General widely known for his defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn, had believed strongly in pageantry associated with his troops in battle. Mears read this while studying about the General. He decided that pageantry could accompany a basketball team and might produce positive benefits. While at Cadiz Mears was drafted into the Army. Following his release from the Army he resumed his basketball coaching at West Tech High School in Cleveland, Ohio. During his stay at West Tech he attended many Cleveland Indians baseball games and noticed the promotions associated with the games. Bill Veck owned the Indians at this time and was the person responsible for the promotional ideas occurring during the baseball games in Cleveland. Mears recalls that Veck had midgets play on the baseball teams and employed other outlandish ventures in an effort to spur fan interest.[13]

Many coaches are shaped by their college experience and often take coaching strategy and techniques with them as they leave college. This was not the case with Ray Mears and his experiences at Miami University. Mears describes learning little about the game of basketball while a player at Miami. He credits his development as a coach with summers spent at basketball camps in the West Virginia mountains assisting Claire Bee,

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[12]Ibid
[13]Ibid

legendary coach at Long Island University, with the coaching of the campers.[14] It was during these summers in the early 1950's that Mears developed his philosophy and learned the coaching strategy that characterized his teams for years. The dominant characteristics of Mears' teams were the match-up zone defense and a conservative offense. He describes sessions with Claire Bee where Bee would instruct the other coaches attending the camps in the aspects of the game of basketball.[15]

The competitive nature in Mears drove him to higher challenges. When the Tennessee position was offered, he sensed an opportunity to coach against Adolph Rupp and Babe McCarthy and he reveled at the chance. While at Miami he had played against Rupp's Fabulous Five, and even though Miami lost by 8 points, he had experienced the superior level of play that existed at Kentucky.[16]

Upon arriving at Tennessee Mears immediately hired Bill Gibbs, a high school coach in Ohio, as an assistant coach. Tennessean Tommy Bartlett was appointed as freshman basketball coach. This placed three coaches in a position to assist the basketball program. Most Southeastern Conference universities had only one assistant coach and the head coach. It was April of 1962 when Mears arrived at Tennessee and basketball recruiting was in full force. During the spring of 1962 Mears moved to Knoxville and lived in the athletic dormitory while recruiting. Mears and Gibbs were busy on the recruiting trail that spring, and signed ten young men as freshman, as there were no limits on basketball scholarships at the time. His family moved to Tennessee that summer.[17]

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[14]Padwee, Sandy, *Basketball's Hall of Fame.* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970). Clair Bee was a successful basketball coach at Rider College, Waynesburg Stae, and Long Island University compiling an overall record of 357 wins and 79 losses. Bee also published technical books on basketball and numerous fictional books. The college basketball gambling scandal of the early 1950's in which three of his LIU players were involved ended his cpoaching career on a dark note. He was elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1967.

[15]Ibid

[16]Ibid.

[17] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 135-160.

Mears was fortunate in coming to Tennessee at the time he did because of two superior players that Sines had recruited the year before. A. W. Davis, on the freshman team, and Danny Schultz, who had just been recruited out of junior college, were players who made major contributions in Mears' early teams. Davis was a highly recruited player who spurned Kentucky and other established college basketball powerhouses to play for the Vols.

Although Mears had been highly successful in his professional life, in the area of personal health Mears was not so fortunate. During preseason practice Mears was stricken with an attack of manic depression that sidelined him for his entire first season as head coach at Tennessee.[18] A. W. Davis recalls an early season trip to El Paso, Texas, in which he describes Mears as being irrational, making statements that made no sense. It was after returning from this trip that Bill Gibbs began directing the team.[19] When Bowden Wyatt, Athletic Director at Tennessee, named Gibbs to temporarily replace Mears, he thrust a man with no collegiate coaching experience into the role of head coach at a major university. Gibbs now had the job of coaching head to head against great coaches such as Adolph Rupp who he beat twice that season. With this change in coaching came a major change in strategy. Defensively, the match-up zone which Mears had used successfully at Whittenberg and had planned to use at Tennessee was discarded in favor of a man-to-man defense. The match-up zone was a very complicated defense and Gibbs was not that familiar with it.[20]

When the 1962-63 season started, no one knew that Mears would be out for the entire year. Mears was able to do some recruiting and scouting, and he even sat on the sidelines during a few home games. However, his appearances were limited and Gibbs was

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[18] Ibid., 135-142.
[19] A. W. Davis, Interview by author, 4 April 1996.
[20] Ibid., 41.

allowed to direct the team as he saw fit.[21] The first game that year was against East Tennessee State and the Vols won with the much heralded sophomore and Rutledge native A. W. Davis leading the way with 17 points.[22] Although Gibbs changed defenses, he did not change offenses, preferring to stay with the conservative ball control game much liked by Mears. Tennessee won the first five games, but lost the next three to Missouri, Evansville, and Texas Western.[23]

Tennessee began their SEC season in the winter of 1963 by losing to instate rival Vanderbilt. They won at Tulane then upset Kentucky in Lexington by using an up-tempo game in the second half against the favored Wildcats. This had to be a most satisfying win for Bill Gibbs winning in his first game against the legendary Adolph Rupp. Tennessee evened their SEC record at three and three by beating Georgia 94-65. Using the running game Tennessee scored the most points of the season. However, the joy from this win was short lived as the team lost the next five games and fell to ninth in the SEC standings.[24] The silver lining in the losing streak was A. W. Davis who was improving almost every night and getting rave reviews from opposing coaches and from Gibbs.[25] The second time they played Vanderbilt, they lost in overtime 74-72, but this far surpassed the 18 point loss they had suffered against them earlier in the season.[26] The 1962-63 season ended with a win over rival Kentucky in Knoxville with Davis outplaying Kentucky All-American

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[21]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 4 November 1994.
[22]Ben Byrd, " Tennessee Seeks Victory No. 3 At UT Fieldhouse,"*The Knoxville Journal*, 3 December 1962, 12.
[23] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 216.
[24] Marvin West, "Vols Kayoed by Rebs, 85-78, Wake Up in the SEC's 9th Spot, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 12 February 1963, 6-7.
[25] Marvin West, "Dandy Vol A. W. Davis Is Better by the Hour, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel,* 13 February 1963, 14.
[26] Marvin West, "U-T Drops Overtime Tilt, 74-72, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel,* 17 February 1963, Sports Section.

Cotton Nash.[27] This win concluded the season for Tennessee at thirteen wins and eleven losses. In the lockerroom after the Kentucky game, senior Jerry Parker said "maybe I'm getting stars in my eyes, but I believe this year is the beginning of a great basketball surge at Tennessee."[28] Tom Siler, Knoxville News Sentinel Sports Editor wrote, " Bill Gibbs and Tommy Bartlett were magnificent in the absence of Coach Mears.... Just think what the future holds with all three ready and able for the entire season... If I were Dr. Holt I would begin thinking about knocking out the end of that building and doubling the arena... It'll take some time and some money, but the crowds will be there when the Vols move into contention next season".[29]

Jerry Parker and Tom Siler were prophetic in their statements. The men's basketball program at the University of Tennessee was on the verge of unprecedented success. However, the head coaching position was not solidified following this season. Bill Gibbs had been more than adequate as a replacement for Mears. What was going to happen regarding Gibbs and Mears? Would Mears regain his health and return to coaching? Did the university lose faith in Mears due to his health problems?

During the spring of 1963 Mears' health improved and he was able to completely fulfill his coaching duties. The predicament concerning the role of Bill Gibbs was not a pleasant one recalls Mears. Ray Mears described a feeling of concern when he resumed his coaching duties during that spring. He was concerned about the success Gibbs had had as interim coach. Former player A. W. Davis reports that Gibbs was attempting to undermine Mears and obtain the head coaching position. Mears sensed this and demoted Gibbs to coach of the freshman team.[30]

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[27] Marvin West, "Vicious Vols Massacre U-K, 63-55, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel,* 3 March 1963, Sports Section.
[28] Ibid.
[29]Editorial, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel,* 3 April 1963, 9.
[30]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 4 November 1994.

Chapter II

Contenders

The reconstructive phase for the Tennessee basketball program was short-lived. Ray Mears was back in good health for the 1963-64 season, and A. W. Davis and Danny Shultz returned as varsity holdovers. The team welcomed Howard Bayne and Larry McIntosh from the freshman team. Bayne and McIntosh were AAU industrial league players that Mears had spotted while still in Ohio. He persuaded Bayne and McIntosh to come to Tennessee. McIntosh was a hard-working wing player and Bayne was a strong rebounder with excellent quickness. During preseason practice Mears installed his trademark match-up zone defense and his conservative 1-3-1 offense. Mears praised Sid Elliot, his forward, for his off-season conditioning and shooting practice saying that they would pay big dividends this season.[31]

Davis and Shultz were the foundation for the 1963-64 team. John Sines had recruited and signed both of these players while he was coach at Tennessee. This proved fortunate for Mears. Davis had played well for the freshman team during the 1962-63 season and Shultz was highly touted coming out of Hiwassee Junior College. These two players combined with Elliott, Bobby Hogsett, McIntosh, and Bayne to form the nucleus of a promising squad for the 1963-64 season. During preseason practice Mears worked with the big men while assistant Tommy Bartlett drilled the guards. Bill Gibbs had been placed in charge of the freshman team.[32]

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[31] "Mears Greets 16-Man Vol Squad Tuesday, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel,* 13 October 1963, 8.
[32]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 1 November 1994.

The trademark Mears' philosophy was evident during the preseason scrimmages in the fall of 1963. This philosophy consisted of a conservative 1-3-1 offense and a solid matchup zone defense. This combination of a complicated but effective defense and conservative offense proved the mainstay of the early Volunteer teams under the direction of Ray Mears. The matchup zone throttled many high powered college offenses. Mears' strategy along with a talented group of players provided a bright future for Tennessee basketball.

Entering the 1963-64 season there were still question marks. The previous year's team had established a 13-11 record with the two defeats of Kentucky being the highlights of the previous season. The future appeared bright, but Ray Mears had not been coach for most of the 1962-63 season and there were many unknowns going into the 1963-64 season. Would Mears' health allow him to coach the entire season? Would the situation of moving Bill Gibbs to coach the freshman team have any negative effects? Danny Shultz and A. W. Davis appeared ready to play, but would there be adequate support from other players?

In opposition to the previous season, Mears installed the intricate matchup zone defense. In many early games that season Tennessee limited their opponent's scoring because of the matchup zone and adaptations of it. Danny Schultz lived up to his reputation as an offensive threat, scoring in the thirty point range several times with his accurate outside shooting and outstanding free-throw percentage. A. W. Davis proved to be a steady player, contributing important points and rebounds throughout the season. However, the contributions of these two were not equaled by other members of the team. Opposing defenses began to concentrate on Schultz and his teammates did not respond offensively.[33]

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[33] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 151-157.

Tragedy struck the Tennessee basketball program during February of this 1964 season. On the 3rd day of the month a South Central Airlines Beechcraft passenger plane carrying freshman basketball coach Bill Gibbs and nine other Florida residents crashed in Gainsville, Florida killing the pilot and all passengers aboard. Gibbs had been in Florida scouting the Gators for an upcoming game with Tennessee.[34] This loss stunned the university community, and those associated with the basketball program.

Tennessee's 1963-64 season began by winning seven of their first nine games and ten of their first twelve. Wins against Vanderbilt and Maryland were early season highlights. Sellouts were becoming common for home games at the U. T. Field house. Ray Mears was serving green Jello to his players before the games and lemon drops during half-time. The orange and white basketball became a mainstay for the pre-game warm-ups during this season. Mears had intended the two-toned basketball to be used only for home games, but after a losing streak the colorful basketball was permanently adopted.[35]

The persona of Ray Mears was becoming evident in the style of play of the Volunteer basketball team. Competitiveness, a strong work ethic, and an unmatched desire to win flowed from the head coach to the players. A. W. Davis recalled that these aspects were the most distinguishing characteristics of Coach Mears. This competitiveness, his work ethic and preparation of his teams were also the major factors that enabled Mears to be a successful basketball coach at The University of Tennessee.[36]

Tennessee concluded the 1963-64 season finishing second in the Southeastern Conference standings, with a 16-8 overall record. Key losses to Kentucky and Alabama prevented the team from earning a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) berth

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[34]F. M. Williams, "Tragic Day for the Gibbs Began Hectic, But Happy, "*The Nashville Tennessean*, 4 February 1964.
[35]Marvin West, "Vols Have 'Gimmicks' Ready for Commodores, "*The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 3 January 1964, 11.
[36]A. W. Davis, interview by author 4 April 1996.

that goes with winning the conference title. However, Ray Mears' first full season as coach had given the University of Tennessee a competitive team. With Davis, Bayne and other key players returning for the next season, expectations were high for Tennessee basketball.

Improved play on the basketball court was only one aspect of the Mears' coaching legacy. Ever the creator and innovator, Ray Mears sought ways to spice up any and all aspects of the Tennessee basketball program. Mears introduced the practice of running through the "T" at Tennessee basketball games. A large wooden "T" was constructed and the players ran through this prior to tip-off. During player introductions the lights were dimmed and a spotlight was directed at each player as they were introduced. Marching bands and spirited warm-up routines began to accompany U.T. basketball games in Knoxville during the Mears' era. The slogan "Big Orange Country" was developed by Mears, and he exploited this concept to the fullest. Mears had the Tennessee basketball coaching staff and team members wear bright orange blazers.

Later in his career at Tennessee he staged unicycle and bear wrestling exhibitions accompanying basketball games. Ray Mears explains that he had first noticed this type of showmanship as a boy growing up in Ohio when he went to the circus. Additionally, Mears had seen the promotional ideas Bill Veck had used in conjunction with the Cleveland Indians. The wrestling, unicycles and other exhibitions that accompanied Tennessee basketball games in Knoxville were examples of the promotional ideas Mears had noticed in Ohio. He transferred these circus features to basketball games and so the nickname, "the Barnum of College Basketball" was coined for Mears and fittingly so. Mears believed that this festive atmosphere promoted a more vocal crowd, psyched up his players, and intimidated the opposing players.[37]

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[37]Ray Mears, interview by author, 1 November 1994.

All indications are that Mears coined the term "Big Orange Country" which became one of his most significant contributions and remains as a symbol of Tennessee athletics. Mears had noticed that a successful high school team in Steubenville, Ohio had used the slogan "The Big Red" to denote their team. "The Big Red" signified the team and the pride associated with the Steubenville team. Mears had the Steubenville slogan in mind when he came up with the phrase "Big Orange Country". Sensing the importance of pride in athletic teams Mears was attempting to create pride and a recognizable slogan to accompany Tennessee basketball.[38]

Ray Mears was fortunate in player personnel from two standpoints. As noted, John Sines left Mears well supplied with quality players. Additionally, the Knoxville area high schools were producing players of Southeastern Conference capability. Ron Widby out of Fulton High School in Knoxville was one example. During the next several seasons Ray Mears and the Tennessee basketball teams greatly benefited from the services of Widby, Bill Justus, and Jimmy England, all Knoxvillians.

Widby was a sophomore on the 1964-65 team that was captained by A.W. Davis. This team began the season with seven straight wins all supported by excellent team defense. Ray Mears displayed his showmanship early in the conference race. In January he matched Rupp's "stratified transitional hyperbolic paraboloid" with "a iconoclastic defense with disharmonious tendencies."[39] This verbal exchange developed a year earlier when Rupp had used a 1-3-1 zone defense in an attempt to counter the scoring abilities of Danny Shultz. It worked as Kentucky won the game. Rupp was known to dislike a zone and when asked about the use of the zone, Rupp responded with the hyperbole. During the 1964-65 season Tennessee defeated Kentucky and Mears' responded, labeling

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[38]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 12 June 1996.
[39]Marvin West, "Davis, McIntosh Supply Big Punch, "*The Knoxville New-Sentinel*, 17 January 1965.

Tennessee's successful defense to counter Rupp's explanation. Gamesmanship aside, this was an excellent Tennessee team. Climbing in the national rankings by mid-season, thanks to an experienced and well-coached line-up, the 1964-65 Volunteer basketball team made a strong run at the Southeastern Conference title. Approximately 8000 fans watched Tennessee defeat conference leader Vanderbilt at Knoxville.[40] This win placed Tennessee in a tie for first place with Vanderbilt. However, late season losses to Alabama and Kentucky again prevented Tennessee from winning the conference title, but they were runner-up to conference champion Vanderbilt. In spite of this, the Volunteers did finish the season ranked 17th in the final Associated Press College Basketball poll.[41]

The 1963-64 season was the beginning of a successful string of wins for Ray Mears and the Tennessee basketball program. For six straight seasons the basketball team at the University of Tennessee finished no worse than third in the Southeastern Conference final standings. Many times the Volunteers were running second to some excellent Kentucky and Vanderbilt teams. Only one or two key losses prevented Tennessee basketball teams from winning the conference title and advancing to NCAA play. During this era only the regular season champion from the Southeastern Conference was awarded a NCAA bid. This rule denied Tennessee several appearances in this most prestigious of college tournaments.

Improved scheduling was another of the many improvements Ray Mears made in the overall program. The first game of the 1965-66 season against highly rated Michigan was evidence of a strengthened schedule. A December trip to the Rainbow Classic in Hawaii was further evidence of Mears' scheduling changes.

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[40]Editorial, *The Nashville Tennessean*, 2 February 1965.
[41]*The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 3 March, 1965 15.

Four starters returned from the previous year, Bayne, McIntosh, Widby, and Robbins. Joining them were some developing second line players. However, the graduation of A. W. Davis was surely to be felt. The 1965-66 team was a competitive squad, strong defensively in the Mears' tradition. This Tennessee team led the nation in fewest points allowed.[42]

Again this season Tennessee competed against powerful teams within the Southeastern Conference. Rupp's 1965-66 team, known as the "Runts", were undefeated and ranked number one in the college basketball national rankings for much of the 1966 season. During the game against Kentucky in Lexington that season, Mears wore a brown suit, usually reserved for Adolph Rupp. Mears said he did it trying to bring good luck to his team.[43] It was to no avail as the Wildcats won 78-64. Possibly Mears' greatest win at Tennessee came later that season against Kentucky. In the rematch in Knoxville, Tennessee won 69-62, handing the number one ranked and undefeated Wildcats their first and only one of two losses they had that season. Mears said this about the 1966 victory, " This is the greatest, most gratifying victory in my years. This may be the finest Kentucky team ever. Having whipped them is an exciting accomplishment. I can't say enough about the Vols".[44] Tennessee finished third in the Southeastern Conference that season. For three straight years Mears' Tennessee teams had contended for the conference title, but each time had fallen short of their goal.

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[42]"Tennessee's 52.6 Average Leads U. S. in Defense," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 7 January 1966, 12.
[43]Marvin West, "Vol Coach To Wear Brown-Just Like Rupp," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 25 February 1966, 14.
[44]Marvin West, "U-K Spree Shattered By 69-62," *The Knoxville, News-Sentinel*, 6 March 1966, D 1.

Chapter III

Champions

Tennessee basketball teams had been legitimate contenders for the Southeastern Conference title for three years. Were Ray Mears and his Tennessee teams going to be perennial runners-up or could they capture the conference championship and earn the right to play in the NCAA? An expanded arena greeted the 1966-67 Volunteer basketball team. Tennessee's newly named Stokley Athletic Center held 12,000 spectators. This team was the youngest Mears had had at Tennessee. Sophomores guards Bill Justus and Bill Hann were being counted on heavily in preseason practice. Seven-foot Tom Boerwinkle had worked hard to develop his skills for three years at Tennessee and he was now ready to contribute. Widby, Tom Hendrix, and Wes Coffman were the only upper classmen expected to see significant playing time.[45] However, Mears was encouraged with the effort the squad had put forth in preseason practice. Replacing assistant coach Tommy Bartlett, who had accepted the head coaching position at Florida, was Stu Aberdean.

Tennessee defeated a solid Michigan team in the season opener in front of 11,300 fans at the expanded field house.[46] Responding to the growth of college basketball tournaments, Mears created the Volunteer Classic in 1966. The Classic was played in late December in Knoxville and involved four teams. Tennessee was the host team and Mears scheduled three other college basketball teams from around the United States. Tennessee won the initial Classic in December of 1966 by defeating Auburn and Clemson.[47]

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[45]Marvin West, "Mears' Youngest Vol Hoop Team Could Be a Surprise," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 November 1966, 12.
[46]Marvin West," 'Bull,' Hann and Justus Deliver," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 December 1966, 16.
[47]Tom Siler, "Zinged-Up Vols Superb," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 5 December 1966, 14.

Tennessee began the conference race by winning five of its first six conference games. The 1966-67 team was described by Tom Siler as possessing morale, "None of Mears' previous Vol teams has had the unity, the oneness of spirit, the singleness of purpose, as this Mears' machine".[48]

Wins against Kentucky and Vanberbilt placed Tennessee atop the conference standings with a 12-2 conference mark.[49] Tennessee clinched a tie for the conference championship by defeating LSU as senior forward Ron Widby scored 50 points.[50] A triple-overtime win in Starkville, Mississippi clinched the Southeastern Conference title for the Tennessee basketball team. This was the first conference title for Tennessee in basketball since 1943. Ray Mears earned SEC Coach of the Year by the Associated Press for his efforts in developing a strong defensive team and leading them to Tennessee's first conference title in 23 years.[51]

An automatic NCAA birth went with Tennessee's conference title that season. This was the first ever trip to the NCAA's for a Tennessee basketball team. Ray Mears had improved the fortunes of Tennessee basketball in dramatic fashion. Using his conservative offensive philosophy, which was actually an eastern style of basketball that he had learned from Claire Bee, Mears had upset the basketball rhythm in the Southeastern Conference. This was a major reason why his teams had been successful in the previous conferences races. Basketball in the Southeastern Conference had developed largely around Kentucky's running style. The more conservative nature and slower tempo of Mears' offensive philosophy proved problematic for many conference teams. This offensive style caused conference teams to play a game they were unaccustomed to playing. This resulted in

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[48]Tom Siler, "Champion In Defeat," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 18 January 1967, 34.
[49]Marvin West, "Vols Bounce Higher," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 20 February 1967, 17.
[50]Marvin West, "Ron Gets 50! Vols Get Share of Title," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 5 March 1967, D 1.
[51]Ron Speer, "Mears Named SEC Coach of the Year," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 March 1967, 30.

almost immediate success at the conference level for Mears and Tennessee. The success of the 1966-67 team was further evidence of a blending of strategy and talent. Mears' 1-3-1 zone defense allowed Tennessee to lead the nation in fewest points allowed during the 1966-67 season. Tom Boerwinkle anchored the middle of this defense. Boerwinkle's size allowed the other Tennessee players on the floor to extend their defensive range further than normal. The hustling style of play displayed by Bill Justus fit nicely into the Mears' mold. Ron Widby's outside shooting and senior leadership complemented Tennessee's style. Added to this was the tireless assistant coach Stu Aberdean and the relentless drive and competitiveness of Mears. The sum of this mix equaled a harmonious chemistry resulting in success.[52]

Tennessee's foe for their first NCAA game was the University of Dayton. Dayton was led by All-American Don May. Playing in Evanston, Illinois Tennessee fell behind in the first half due to cold shooting. Tennessee narrowed the score in the second half, but Widby's last second shot bounced off the rim and Dayton won the game.[53]

Mears had crossed the threshold of conference success by winning the conference championship in March of 1967, but he was going to have to retool the Big Orange for the upcoming year. This retooling took a different form and color than in years past. Basketball coaches across the South were recognizing the necessity of including African-Americans on their teams. Ray Mears recognized this and was recruiting African-Americans Spencer Haywood, from Detroit, and Rupert Breedlove from Knoxville's Austin High School during the spring of 1967.[54] Breedlove eventually signed with the University of Cincinnati. Haywood did sign with Tennessee, but never became

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[52]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 12 June 1996.
[53]Marvin West, "Indiana Is Consolation Foe Tonight," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 18 March 1967, 6.
[54]David Moffit, "Good Negro Athlete Can Get In the Big Ten, but Not SEC," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 4 April 1967, D 1.

academically eligible to play and transferred to Coffeyville Community Junior College before ever playing a game for Tennessee.[55] Ray Mears and the Tennessee basketball program were still awaiting the day that an African-American would play in a game for the Vols. Vanderbilt did have an African-American basketball player, Perry Wallace. Wallace, from Nashville, enrolled at Vanderbilt in 1966 and played his first varsity game during the 1967-68 season.[56]

Buoyed by the success of the previous years' team, hopes were high at the beginning of the 1967-68 season. Widby was the only starter lost to graduation. Boerwinkle, Justus, Hann, and Mansfield formed a strong quartet of returning players. Sophomore Bobby Croft had shown promise on the freshman team and Mears expected the 6-10 post-player to contribute.[57] Tennessee's 1967-68 record stood at 7-1 by early January. Only a loss to Iowa in the Far West Classic marred the record. Mears competed in this tournament in an attempt to match his Tennessee team against the great UCLA team which included Lew Alcindor and was coached by John Wooden.[58] This was fitting for the competitive nature of Mears, attempting to beat the best. However, the game against UCLA never materialized due to the loss to Iowa.

Tennessee was leading the conference race by the end of January. Boerwinkle was dominating the inside play in most of the games and Justus and Hann contributed enough from outside to keep opponents off balance.[59] The 1967-68 season took a downturn with losses at Georgia and Vanderbilt and at home to Auburn. Tennessee finished the season

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[55]Marvin West, "Haywood Going to Jr. College," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 September 1967, 5.
[56]Paul, J., McGhee, R. V., & Fant, H. (1984). "Arrival and Ascendance of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference", *Phylon* 4 (1984).
[57]Marvin West, "Vols, Good Enough To Repeat, Open Friday," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 November 1967, 7.
[58]Tom Siler, Editorial, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 December 1967, 10.
[59]Tom Siler, Editorial, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 January 1968, 17.

with a 20-6 overall record and tied for second in the conference two games behind conference winner Kentucky.[60]

Tom Boerwinkle's career had ended at Tennessee. The seven-footer had developed into one of the better centers in college basketball during his stay at Tennessee. Boerwinkle was not highly recruited out of high school. Attending Millersburg Military Academy in Kentucky, Boerwinkle was offered few college scholarships when he came out of high school. Mears decided to take a chance on Boerwinkle. Through the efforts of Boerwinkle and the coaching staff, he developed into a quality player. He credits Mears with his improvement. Borewinkle says, "I guess the most important factor is the coaches never gave up on me. They kept trying. And I kept trying because they did. It must have taken great patience on their part".[61]

Athletics at The University of Tennessee in 1968 had improved dramatically since the tumultuous days of the early 1960's. Mears had taken Tennessee basketball to new heights. The basketball arena had been expanded and crowds were overflowing. The Tennessee track team won the SEC indoor and outdoor championships. Doug Dickey had the football team on a solid foundation. The Tennessee golf and swimming teams had finished second in their quests for conference titles. Baseball and tennis were fielding competitive teams, both finishing in the upper half of the conference races. Overall the won-lost record for all varsity sports at Tennessee was 94-30-2. This calculated to a winning percentage of .762.[62]

Mears and Tennessee had an experienced backcourt returning for the 1968-69 season. Hann and Justus were seasoned veterans. Croft, who weighed in at 225 pounds,

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[60]Marvin West, "U-T Takes 2nd in SEC in Overtime Victory," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 7 March 1968, 35.
[61]Marvin West," 'Ray Mears Is a Magician'," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 23 February 1968, 17.
[62]Marvin West, "Big Games, Big Crowds, Big Excitement=Bill," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 25 December 1968, 45.

up from 205 pounds the previous year, was the post player, and three sophomores, Jimmy England, Rudy Kinnard, and Don Johnson battled for the other two starting positions.[63] The previous year's team had been led by the massive post player Boerwinkle. In contrast, point guard Bill Justus was the leader for the 1968-69 Tennessee basketball team. Justus was averaging almost 20 points a game and had scored over 30 on one occasion. His defense and rebounding were of the same caliber. Justus was cut from the mold of Ray Mears and displayed similar qualities as those associated with the coach, excellent work ethic, tough defender, and superb competitor. He was nicknamed "the adrenaline kid".[64] Justus was the leader of the Vols during the 1968-69 season.

Kentucky was nationally ranked this year and the team to beat, as usual. The Wildcats defeated Tennessee in Knoxville and won the conference championship while Tennessee again finished second. Tennessee went to the National Invitational Tournament in March of 1969. They were the first Southeastern Conference team to play in the NIT since the early 1950s due to league regulations following the gambling scandals associated with college basketball in the New York City area. The Southeastern Conference, in an effort to curtail gambling scandals among member schools prohibited conference teams from playing in the National Invitational Tournament until 1968. In the NIT that year Tennessee won two games before losing to eventual champion Temple and finished third.[65] Mears had recorded another successful year as Tennessee basketball coach. His overall winning percentage was .769 following the conclusion of the 1968-69 season. This percentage placed him second behind only Adolph Rupp in winning percentages of college basketball coaches.[66]

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[63]"3 Sophs Hold Key to Vols' Hoop Hopes," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 25 November 1968, 8.
[64]Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 171.
[65]Ibid, 177.
[66]Ken Mink, "Mears Moves to 2nd in Coaches' Standings," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 March 1969, 37.

Chapter IV

Continuing Success

During the decade of the 1960's basketball in the Southeastern Conference grew in importance. Kentucky was still regarded as the premier team, and the one most clubs in the conference took pride in trying to beat. Tennessee and Vanderbilt both developed solid programs during the 1960's and gained national respectability. The growing emphasis on the sport of basketball was showcased in the SEC by Tennessee, Alabama, Auburn, Ole Miss, Mississippi State, and Vanderbilt building new gymnasiums during this decade. Basketball was becoming profitable for conference schools as illustrated by Tennessee's basketball program netting better than $100,000 a year by the late 1960's. Babe McCarthy at Mississippi State and Ray Mears of Tennessee challenged Adolph Rupp during this period. Many thought that Kentucky's slight decline in the early 1960's would cause Rupp to retire. This was not the case as Rupp continued to coach Kentucky to conference and national success until he reached mandatory retirement age in 1972.[67] However, new challenges emerged for Kentucky and Rupp. Roy Skinner and Ray Mears fielded consistently strong basketball programs at Vanderbilt and Tennessee. Mississippi State had challenged Kentucky's dominance in the early part of the decade but failed to maintain its success. Florida contended for Southeastern Conference basketball titles in the later part of the 1960's, but fell just short of being a consistently strong team. Regardless, the Southeastern Conference became a much stronger basketball league during the 1960's due in large part to coaches such as Ray Mears. Other Southeastern Conference schools took

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[67]Nellie, Humbert. *The Winning Tradition; A History of Kentucky Wildcat Basketball.* Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, (1984).

notice of the improvement in Tennessee's basketball program, and this appeared to be a stimulant in efforts to improve their own programs.[68]

The 1969-70 Tennessee basketball team was not characteristic of a Ray Mears' squad. During the preseason Mears expressed the importance of outside shooting for this year's team. Defense was usually the focal point for a Mears' coached team. However, Mears knew that Jimmy England, Don Johnson, Kerry Meyers, and Rudy Kinnard were all outstanding shooters and he believed their shooting ability would determine the season's outcome.[69] The season began on an extremely high note. Tennessee journeyed to Columbia, South Carolina and defeated the number one ranked University of South Carolina on their home floor, 55-54.[70] However, this success did not continue. Losses to Mississippi, Georgia and Florida placed Tennessee in a precarious situation in the conference standings. Things continued to get worse for Tennessee. An injury to post player Don Johnson further weakened a questionable inside attack. In Lexington the Volunteers were dealt their fourth conference loss, 68-52.[71] With the season appearing to be in shambles, Tennessee rolled to seven consecutive conference wins. Strong play from England and Croft was responsible for the surge. The 1969-70 team which suffered from a lack of overall size finished fifth in the conference standings, the worst finish since Mears' first season of 1962-63.[72]

Mears and assistant coach Aberdeen had been developing a quick tempo offense for the past three years, Mears reported at the end of the 1970 season. He announced that the 1970-71 team would be playing a running style of offense. He explained his switch in

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[68]Tom Siler, Editorial, *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, 17 December 1969, 50.
[69]Ted Riggs, "Vol Hopes Hinge On Outside Shooters," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 4 December 1969, 40.
[70]Marvin West, "Vols Shock No. 1 Gamecocks," *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, 7 December 1969, D 1.
[71]Marvin West, "Kentucky's Board Dominance Decks Vols, 68-52," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 18 January 1970, D 1.
[72]Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 179.

philosophy was in response to successfully recruiting players better suited to the more fast-paced style of play.[73] As the 1970-71 season unfolded Tennessee's basketball team appeared deep and experienced. England, Johnson, and Jim Woodall were returning seniors. Mike Edwards, a sophomore perimeter player from Indiana, was going to start. Rupert Breedlove, a 6-11 African-American center from Knoxville was counted on to provide strong low-post play. However, off-the-court problems prevented Breedlove from ever playing at Tennessee and Mears eventually suspended Breedlove from the squad.[74] Breedlove's suspension and eventual dismissal from the team delayed the racial integration of the Tennessee basketball program for another period. Mears had been attempting to recruit African-American basketball players and Breedlove's departure proved problematic for the 1970-71 squad. The team was now left with no player over six-feet seven-inches in height.

A successful mixture of seniors and sophomores allowed Tennessee to begin the 1970-71 season with five straight wins. Mears' zone defenses were causing opponents problems and Tennessee's deep bench was providing a supporting role in the wins. Mears had indeed sped up the offense. Tennessee scored 89 points in defeating Oregon State 89-61 and 98 points in a 98-85 win over Mississippi. A 75-71 defeat of Kentucky in Knoxville placed Tennessee in a three way tie for the conference lead in January.[75] The smallish Vols were overachieving, but their lack of size eventually caught up with them in losses to LSU and Vanderbilt.[76] Tennessee lost only four conference games during the 1970-71 season, but still finished second in the conference standings, two games behind conference winner Kentucky. Tennessee's 20-6 record earned the team another trip to the NIT.[77] In

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[73]Ben Byrd, "Mears Says Vols Plan Quick Tempo," *The Knoxville Journal*, 24 March 1970, 11.
[74]Ben Byrd, "Breedlove Suspended For Season," *The Knoxville Journal*, 10 December 1970, 27.
[75]Ben Byrd, "Vols Change Complexion Of SEC Race," *The Knoxville Journal*, 18 January 1971, 15.
[76]Ben Byrd, Editorial, *The Knoxville Journal*, 3 February 1971, 10.
[77]Ben Byrd, "Vols, UK Carry SEC Hopes Into Post-Season," *The Knoxville Journal*, 8 March 1971, 14.

the NIT that year Tennessee defeated St. Johns in overtime, but lost to Duke in the second round. The 1970-71 season was indicative of the versatility Mears displayed as a coach. Widely known as a conservative offensive coach Mears changed the team's offensive philosophy for the 1970-71 season. Mears had been successful with the conservative offensive style of play at Whittenberg and Tennessee. However, Mears' knew that a faster paced offense had its benefits. Additionally, many of Mears' players were better suited to an up tempo style of play. These factors allowed Mears to change tactics. The conservative offense had been criticized by fans and members of the media, but these criticisms played no part in Mears' decision. The switch in offensive philosophy may not have been influenced by fan or media criticism, but it is likely that Mears considered the attractiveness of the new offensive style to potential recruits and their desire to play in an open offensive system. This type of system would generally allow players more opportunities to score and the tempo of play was more pleasing to college basketball players.[78] Lack of size was not going to be the problem for the 1971-72 Tennessee basketball team. Sophomore center Len Kosmalski was a seven-footer, Wayne Tomlinson was 6-9, and junior college forward Larry Robinson was a muscular 6-7.[79] Robinson had the distinction of being the first African-American to play basketball for the University of Tennessee. Mears had recruited and even signed other black athletes, but circumstances prevented these African-Americans from actually playing in a game for Tennessee.[80]

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[78]Ray Mears, interview by author 12 June 1996.

[79]"Wayne Tomlinson Developed On 'Unemployment Play'," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 October 1971, 8.

[80]William Rollins, from Knoxville, was the first African-American to tryout for the University of Tennessee basketball team in the fall of 1961. His tryout was met with opposition from then athletic director Robert Neyland. A harsh verbal exchange occurred as Neyland confronted Rollins following his tryout. Rollins was eventually cut from the team, but this event is significant in that it represents the first time an African-American athlete attempted to vie for a position on not just a University of Tennessee team, but on any Southeastern Conference team. *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 17 October 1961.

Pre-season conditioning was especially strenuous for this edition of the Tennessee basketball team. Mears was continuing to lean towards a faster paced offense. He named it the "TNT" offense, "Tennessee's Nuclear Tempered Offense". The extra conditioning work was needed if the team was to successfully play a faster paced style of play.[81] The 1971-72 Volunteer basketball team wasted no time in showing their improved inside play in routing UC Irvine 89-53. Tennessee out rebounded the Anteaters 61-28. The strong inside play was matched outside by junior Mike Edwards, who scored 36 points in the season's opener. Tennessee lost the second game of the season to Houston, 67-65, but won the Volunteer Classic in December by defeating Penn State and Michigan State.[82]

There was no clear favorite in the Southeastern Conference race during this season as in years past, according to Ben Byrd, Knoxville Journal sports writer.[83] Kentucky was the perennial favorite, but they showed weaknesses during the early pre-conference part of the season. Mears knew his Volunteers stood a good chance of winning the conference if some of the reserve players could contribute.[84] Tennessee won two tough road games at Georgia and Florida, but lost at Kentucky during the first part of the 1972 conference schedule. During the warm-ups prior to the game against Kentucky in Lexington, the Volunteers were pelted by oranges thrown by the Kentucky student section. When Kentucky's coach Rupp realized what was happening, he rushed onto the floor waving his arms in an attempt to get the students to stop throwing oranges, but to no avail. University of Kentucky President Dr. Otis Singletary apologized to Mears and the

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[81]"Vols Test TNT Offense Against Anteaters," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 December 1971, 41.
[82]Ronald Julian, "Edwards 26 Sparks 85-61 Win, " *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 19 December 1971, D 1.
[83]Ben Byrd, "Unsteady Vols Get Ready For Wild And Wooly Chase," *The Knoxville Journal*, 6 January 1972, 18.
[84]Ben Byrd, "Reserves Must Produce For Vols To Win--Mears, " *The Knoxville Journal*, 14 January 1972, 8.

University of Tennessee for the orange throwing incident.[85] A late-season win over Vanderbilt placed Tennessee in position to win the conference title in the season finale by defeating Kentucky in Knoxville. The game was close and Tennessee was behind by one point with five seconds to play. Mike Edwards, a ninety-percent free throw shooter, was at the foul line. He missed the front end of a one-and -one and Tennessee lost the game. A win would have placed the Volunteers in the NCAA. Because the team's voting was not unanimous to accept the NIT bid, Mears announced that the team would forego the post-season tournament.[86]

Tennessee teams during the Ray Mears' era were often only one shot away from glory. The results of the 1971-72 season were typical of the events surrounding many of the Tennessee teams coached by Mears. Missed opportunities and ill-timed injuries placed Mears and Tennessee in the position of Southeastern Conference runner-up rather than champion. In other instances team personnel prevented championship results. The decision of Rudy Kinnard to forego his final year of basketball eligibility in order to concentrate on baseball cost Tennessee the services of a senior point guard, a valuable player in the Mears' offensive system.[87] These and similar instances in combination with the fact that only conference champions were awarded NCAA bids prevented the possibility of Tennessee teams displaying their abilities in the major post-season tournament.

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[85]Ben Byrd," Vols Still In Catbird's Seat Despite Loss," *The Knoxville Journal*, 24 January 1972, 14.
[86]Marvin West," Wildcats Deal Vols 67-66 Loss," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 10 March 1972, 15.
[87] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 179.

Chapter V

Consistency

In October of 1972 the Southeastern Conference basketball coaches held a meeting in Birmingham. During this meeting Tennessee was selected as the pre-season favorite to win the league's basketball title, and Tennessee center Len Kosmalski was selected as the conference's best player.[88] Mears had a solid cast returning. In addition to Kosmolski, Edwards and Robinson were returning starters. Sophomores Rodney Woods and Dan Moody were capable of filling the other spots. However, an early season loss at Marquette, 56-30, was one of Mears' worst defeats to date at Tennessee. This game matched the brazen Mears with the equally competitive coach, Al McGuire.[89] Tennessee's record stood at 2-2 after losing to Missouri in the Volunteer Classic.[90] Playing without the injured Kosmolski in the East Coast Athletic Conference Holiday Basketball Festival, Tennessee lost twice in the New York City tournament.[91] The Volunteers reversed their fortunes when the conference race began, winning four out of their first five conference games, including a one point win over Kentucky in Knoxville.[92] In late February Tennessee clung to a one game lead over Kentucky and an Associated Press national ranking of 17.[93] Losses to LSU and Vanderbilt placed supreme importance on the final regular season game at Kentucky. Kentucky, coached by Joe Hall following Rupp's retirement, again defeated a Tennessee team 86-81.[94] Tennessee finished the 1972-73

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[88]"Vols On Hot Spot In SEC Cage Race," *The Knoxville Journal*, 31 October 1972, 11.
[89]Ben Byrd, "Marquette Press, Stall Thwart UT," *The Knoxville Journal*, 6 December 1972, 12.
[90]Ben Byrd, "Missouri Wins Classic," *The Knoxville Journal*, 18 December 1972, 17.
[91]"Kos Not in Vols' Plans for Bulldogs," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 January 1973, 35.
[92]Marvin West, "Pressure Proof Vols Sting Kentucky," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 21 January 1973, D 1.
[93]Marvin West, "Vols Fall to LSU," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 27 February 1973, 13.
[94]Marvin West, " 'Cats Kill UT's Title Bid, 86-81," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 9 March 1973, 18.

season in the all too accustomed role of runner-up for the Southeastern Conference basketball title. This was the sixth runner-up finish for Mears in his 11 years as Tennessee basketball coach.

Recruiting Strategy

During his years at Tennessee Ray Mears recruited basketball players from across the United States and Canada. An abundance of local athletes had been successful under the direction of Mears. Additionally, Mears had secured the services of several players from northern states, such as Howard Bayne, Mike Edwards, Len Kosmalski and others who performed well for the Mears' coached Volunteer teams. The north-south recruiting strategy had paid dividends for Mears and Tennessee. College basketball coaches from across the South had successfully utilized northern talent in developing winning basketball programs. Frank McGuire, who coached at both North and South Carolina had gotten talented players from the New York City area for years. The 1973-74 Tennessee basketball team was going to benefit directly from perhaps the best northern player Mears had signed up to that point. Ernie Grunfeld from Forest Hills, New York signed with Tennessee in April of 1973.[95] Grunfeld's signing was timely. This was the first year that freshmen were eligible to play on the varsity basketball teams. Grunfeld, in the typical New York City fashion, had learned the game of basketball playing on the highly competitive playgrounds of the city. Grunfeld opened the1973-74 season's basketball practice as a starting wing player. Rodney Woods, Kosmolski, Wayne Tomlinson, and John Snow manned the other spots.[96]

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[95]"Frosh Grunfeld With First Team," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 14 October 1973, 11.
[96]"Mears Eager To See Hoop Vols 'On Run'," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 21 October 1973, 8.

Tennessee started that season 3-1 and then defeated Temple 11-6 in a game noted for the stalling tactics used by both teams. Temple began the delaying tactics in an attempt to pull Tennessee out of a zone defense, but Mears stayed in the zone. This resulted in a game marked by an extremely low score.[97] The Vol's record fell to 6-4 after losing to Alabama and Mississippi.[98] What had been a promising season was rapidly evolving into a season where hopes for a conference championship appeared to be slipping away. In the typical Mears fashion Tennessee reversed the losing trend with wins over Kentucky, LSU, and Vanderbilt.[99] Tennessee finished the regular season in third place in the Southeastern Conference standings and accepted an invitation to the inaugural Commissioners' Tournament in St. Louis.[100] Tennessee lost to Indiana 73-71 in the only game the team played in the tournament.[101]

In May of 1974 Tennessee signed heralded prep star Bernard King from Brooklyn, New York. The high scoring forward was another northern recruit who proved fruitful for the fortunes of Tennessee basketball.[102] The successful recruitment of King and Grunfeld exemplify not only Mears' recruiting strategy, but his and Aberdeen's work ethic. Aberdeen spent 50 days of one two-month recruiting period in pursuit of Grunfeld. Mears and Aberdeen used their New York City connections to gain knowledge about prospective recruits. Aberdeen spent several weeks each summer visiting basketball camps in eastern Pennsylvania and New York state evaluating various players.[103] The work paid off

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[97]Marvin West, "Temple Freeze Thawed by Vols, 11-6," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 16 December 1973, D 1.
[98]Marvin West, "Ole Miss' Strong Finish Decides It," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 13 January 1974, D 1.
[99]Marvin West, "Grunfeld Hits 23 to Propel UT Shocker," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 February 1974, D 1.
[100]"Vols Await Indiana Michigan Loser," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 March 1974, 16.
[101] Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 186.
[102]Marvin West, "UT's 3rd Hoop Signee Is New Yorker King," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 May 1974, 6.
[103]Ben Byrd, "One Small Recruiter And Two Big Players," *The Knoxville Journal*, 9 January 1975, 24.

handsomely for Tennessee in the upcoming three seasons as King and Grunfeld teamed to form the "Ernie and Bernie" show. This pair of talented forwards became two of Tennessee's most productive basketball players in the history of the university. In spite of the preseason optimism the 1974-75 season began on an ominous note. Grunfeld was sidelined with a broken arm, and Woods was nursing various injuries. However, King lived up to his billing as he scored 42 points in a season-opening win over Wisconsin-Milwaukee.[104] King and Grunfeld combined for 58 points in a January 1975 loss to Alabama, and Tennessee fell to 1-1 in the conference and 7-2 overall.[105]

Controversy arose concerning King's high school transcript during mid-January of 1975. In response to either an inquiry from a rival school or a routine NCAA investigation, King's high school grades and his related college eligibility were questioned. While The University of Tennessee officials investigated King's transcript King sat out one game, a 62-59 loss to Auburn. His transcripts were reviewed and accepted and he returned to action against Alabama.[106] The controversy did not affect the quality of King's play as he and Grunfeld continued to lead Tennessee in scoring. Losses to Alabama and LSU proved costly to the Volunteers during this season. Tennessee was awarded a bid to the Conference Commissioner's Tournament (CCT) following the close of the regular season.[107] Playing uninspired basketball Tennessee was defeated by Bowling Green in the first round of the CCT 67-58. Tennessee finished the 1974-75 season with an 18-8 record and tied for third in a year in which the Southeastern Conference was extremely strong.[108]

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[104]Ronald Julian, "Bernard: King of the Ball," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 December 1974, D 1.
[105]Marvin West, "King, Grunfeld Combine for 58," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 7 January 1975, 12.
[106]Marvin West, "UT Stand: King's OK," *The Knoxville Journal*, 6 February 1975, 14.
[107]Ben Byrd, "Vols Headed For CCA," *The Knoxville Journal*, 7 March 1975, 8.
[108]Ben Byrd, "Bowling Green Trips Vols," *The Knoxville Journal*, 15 March 1975, 9.

Chapter VI

Great Expectations

Grunfeld and King were both back for the 1975-76 season. King had had knee surgery during the summer of 1975, but was healthy when practice began in October.[109] Point guard Rodney Woods was the only significant loss from the previous season and Tennessee fans had national title hopes. Tennessee experienced early success by defeating Biscayne, Duke, and Michigan.[110] In December of 1975 Tennessee won the Sugar Bowl Basketball Classic by defeating Tulane in the finals, 97-73. King and Grunfeld combined for 72 points and 30 rebounds in the victory over Tulane.[111] Tennessee led the Southeastern Conference basketball standings in early February with a 7-1 conference mark and a 14-2 overall record.[112] Tennessee won two big games in the following weeks, defeating Alabama and Kentucky. Both games were marked by Alabama and Kentucky students throwing oranges on the floor and controversy was present throughout.[113] A hard fought double-overtime contest against Alabama in Tuscaloosa placed Alabama atop the conference standings as the Tide beat Tennessee 93-90.[114] Tennessee went on to finish second in the conference with a 14-4 conference record. The Volunteers were awarded Tennessee's second NCAA bid following the close of the regular season. However, King had a badly dislocated thumb. The first round NCAA tournament game was against

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[109]Marvin West, "Bernard King: Healthy, Happy Volunteer," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 5 October 1975, 3.
[110]Ben Byrd, "No-Knockout Vol Cagers Win Another," *The Knoxville Journal*, 8 December 1975, 10.
[111]Ben Byrd, Editorial, *The Knoxville Journal*, 30 December 1975, 9.
[112]Marvin West, "Bernard Scores 37 as Orangemen Run Hoop Mark to 7-1," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 February 1976, D 1.
[113]Marvin West, "Vols Flatten UK in Stormy Struggle," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 8 February 1976, D 1.
[114]Marvin West, "Alabama Wins, 93-90, in Double Overtime," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 February 1976, D 1.

Virginia Military, and playing without the injured King, Tennessee lost 81-75.[115]

One of the better forward tandems in the history of college basketball were together for the last time during the 1976-77 basketball season. Grunfeld was in his final year of eligibility and King, a junior, would leave Tennessee following the season to enter the professional ranks by using the hardship clause of the National Basketball Association.

There were clouds hanging over this 1976-77 season as King was having off-the-court problems. King had been involved in an altercation with Knoxville police in April of 1976 when he was stopped for driving without a license and became unruly. Following King's October arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol, Mears decided to suspend King from the team for one quarter.[116] In addition, Mears was suffering from exhaustion. Following directions from his doctor, Mears decided to take some time off. During Mears' absence from the team during December and January Aberdeen directed the team.[117] In spite of early bad omens, Tom Siler predicted in November of 1976 a second place Southeastern Conference finish for Tennessee and he projected a top twenty national ranking for the Volunteers if King and Mears returned.[118]

Tennessee was an extremely talented team entering the 1976-77 season. Although Mears was still out King did return. Joining King and Grunfeld were point guard Johnny Darden, guard Mike Jackson, and freshman center Reggie Johnson. Tennessee started the season with lackluster performances which resulted in losses to Duke in Knoxville and San Francisco in the Utah Classic. Grunfeld explained that something was missing, "Everybody is trying, I know we are, but something is missing. I can't put my finger on it. I don't know

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[115]Marvin West, "Keydets Advance in NCAA," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 14 March 1976, D 1.
[116]Marvin West, "King Suspended by Mears," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 October 1976, D 1.
[117]"Exhausted Mears To Take a Break," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 30 October 1976, 12.
[118]Tom Siler, Editorial, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 25 November 1976, 22.

what's wrong, but we look terrible. I can tell you that for sure".[119]

Mears continued to be sidelined for health reasons and even spent time in St Albans Hospital in Radford, Virginia.[120] A trip to Spain during the Christmas holidays appeared to aid the team chemistry problem from which the Vols were suffering. King scored 55 points in a victory over a team of African All-Stars in Spain.[121] Mears returned to work during the first week of January in 1977. Tennessee began the conference schedule with six consecutive wins, highlighted by a 71-67 victory over the seconded ranked Kentucky Wildcats in Lexington.[122] Tennessee took the conference lead and rose to fifth in the national rankings by defeating Alabama 92-89 in Tuscaloosa.[123] A Kentucky win over Alabama coupled with a Tennessee loss to Georgia pushed Tennessee to second, one game behind Kentucky in the conference standings.[124] A regular season showdown with rival Kentucky loomed.

Rivalry and Spirit

The Kentucky-Tennessee basketball rivalry that developed between the two universities during the Ray Mears' era was one of the nation's most hotly contested college basketball rivalries during the 1960's and 70's. The two games in which Kentucky and Tennessee competed each season often dictated the conference basketball champion and the conference's NCAA representative. Furthermore, the immediate success that Bill Gibbs

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[119]Marvin West, "Vols Agree: Something's Missing," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 December 1976, 18.
[120]Roland Julian, "Vols' Finestone Eager for Classic," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 16 December 1976, 16.
[121]"King's Double Fives' Vault Vols," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 December 1976, D 1.
[122]Marvin West, "UT Is 'King' of Wildcats," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 13 January 1977, 18.
[123]Marvin West, "Vols Claim 92-89 SEC Verdict," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 20 February 1977, D 1.
[124]Marvin West, "Vols Stunned by Georgia," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 27 February 1977, D 1.

and then Mears had against Adolph Rupp and Kentucky greatly benefited the Tennessee basketball program. Sellout crowds and highly competitive contests were the norm for the Kentucky-Tennessee basketball games in Knoxville. The atmosphere surrounding the Kentucky-Tennessee games in Knoxville was pleasing to Mears.

Ray Mears desired to instill spirit into the Tennessee basketball program immediately upon his arrival at Tennessee in the spring of 1962.[125] The immediate success that Tennessee teams experienced against Rupp's Kentucky teams did much to inspire fan support and bring high spirits to the team. After Rupp's retirement, Mears' teams continued to have success against Kentucky. Mears' record against Kentucky was 14-14.[126] Mears' and Tennessee's efforts against the Wildcats did as much as any one factor in legitimizing the quality of Tennessee basketball and elevating the status of Southeastern Conference basketball.

The game between Kentucky and Tennessee on March 5, 1977 pitted two top ten teams against each other. Mears' basketball philosophy and style had evolved into more of a wide-open offensive strategy. Tennessee was initiating the fast-break at any opportunity, and this was in direct opposition to the earlier Tennessee teams coached by Mears that preferred a slower offensive tempo. During this game in Knoxville, the Vols repeatedly scored on fast-break opportunities, beating Kentucky's bigger but slower players down the floor. Tennessee eventually came from 11 points down and won the game 81-79. This was Tennessee's fifth consecutive win over Kentucky.[127] Tennessee defeated Vanderbilt in the final regular season game, 65-55. The 1976-77 season ended with Tennessee and Kentucky tied atop the Southeastern Conference standings. This was the second

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[125]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 12 June 1996.

[126]This includes the 1962-63 season when Bill Gibbs served as interim coach. The two Tennessee wins over Kentucky that season are credited to Mears because he was the coach of record.

[127]Marvin West, "King Hits 36, Paces 81-79 Win," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 6 March 1977, D 1.

conference championship for Mears. Tennessee was awarded the school's third NCAA bid following the completion of the regular season. They drew Syracuse in the first round game that was to be played in Baton Rouge.[128]

Mears and Tennessee had never won an NCAA tournament game and they would not win this one. King and Grunfeld both fouled out, and this combined with careless passing led to a 93-88 Syracuse victory.[129] Mears describes this game as one of his most disappointing losses at Tennessee. He thought this team had the talent to win the NCAA championship, and the first round loss to Syracuse was difficult to accept.[130]

Tennessee's best team in the history of the school had gone down in defeat. King and Grunfeld were going to the National Basketball Association. Stu Aberdeen was leaving Tennessee to take the head coaching position at Marshall University.[131] Speculation swirled that Ray Mears was going to retire. These rumors were forgotten as the university awarded Mears with a new five year contract in May of 1977.[132]

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[128]Roland Julian, "Four years of Ernie," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 March 1977, 14.
[129]Tom Siler, "Three Times at Bat, 3 NCAA Strikeouts," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 14 March 1977, 13.
[130]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 12 June 1996.
[131]Marvin West, "UT's Stu Aberdeen Leaving," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 17 March 1977, 25.
[132]"UT Extends Ray Mears' Contract 5 Years, to 1982," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 8 May 1977, D 1.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

Ray Mears had lost King and Grunfeld following the conclusion of the 1976-77 season. Grunfeld had completed his athletic eligibility and King had been drafted into the NBA via the hardship route. Similar to the previous season, Mears began the 1977-78 season with a reoccurrence of his mental exhaustion problems. The 1977-78 season's practice began with picture day on October 15. Mears was too ill to attend.[133] Athletic Director Bob Woodruff placed assistant coach Cliff Wettig in charge of the team in Mears' absence. Wettig and the University were all hopeful for Mears' return during the fall of 1977. Mears was still sidelined as the season began in December. He had been confined to his home since October 15, 1977. In January of 1978 he returned to coaching, but with only limited duties. Mears became a consultant, observer, and promoter of Tennessee basketball and did not return to full-time coaching status. Newspaper reports doubted the possibility of Mears' return to full-time duties and speculated on his successor.[134] Tennessee's basketball season during this turmoil was not up to the customary level of play that had characterized Volunteer teams under the direction of Ray Mears. The 1977-78 team struggled to an 11-16 record.[135] Wettig coached this team with Mears on the sidelines for some of the 1977-78 season's home games, but he was not

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[133]Marvin West, "Mears Ill Again, Wettig in Charge," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 15 October 1977, 8.
[134]Tom Siler, "The Word on UT Basketball Due Saturday," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 5 January 1978, 13.
[135]Marvin West, "Mears Convinced 'I'm Out'," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 6 March 1978, 14.

directly involved in coaching the team.

In early March of 1978 Mears decided he could not return to coaching due to his health problems. Diagnosed with manic depression, the disease prevented him from remembering names or basketball plays and forced his early retirement from coaching. This decision for Mears to retire was a mutual agreement between Athletic Director Bob Woodruff and other members of the athletic committee.[136] Published reports discuss Mears speculating for several months that his time as basketball coach was over at Tennessee. He attempted to continue working for the University's Athletic Department as Director of Promotions.[137] However, Mears explains that his salary was reduced to a level with which he was not satisfied and he resigned that position in 1980.[138]

The 1977-78 season's record will be attributed to Mears even though he did not directly coach the team. The NCAA loss to Syracuse in March of 1977 was the last game Mears ever coached at Tennessee. This game is characteristic of Mears' era as Tennessee coach. Coming close, but falling just short of the pinnacle. Mears' teams at Tennessee came close many times, but never did advance in NCAA tournament play. Mears had a 0-3 record in NCAA tournament play. During his 16 seasons as Tennessee coach, his teams won one Southeastern Conference championship outright and shared two more conference titles. However, the seven second place conference finishes, respectable as they are, may

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[136]Attempts have been made to interview former athletic director Bob Woodruff, but he remains unavailable for comment on this topic and other aspects of the Ray Mears era.

[137]Marvin West, "Ray Mears Era (1962-78) Ends at Tennessee," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 7 March 1978, 12.

[138] Mears recalls a tension filled relationship with Athletic Director Bob Woodruff from the time he relinquished his coaching duties due to health reasons to the time he accepted the position of Athletic Director at UT Martin. Mears says the salary reduction that occurred as a result of the position change made it difficult for him financially, especially considering the fact that he had two sons in college. Additionally, Mears says that there were problems in his job duties in the promotions position. He describes the situation as one in which Woodruff prevented him from performing promotional responsibilities that Mears felt fell under his job description. Ray Mears, Interview by author, 26 September 1996.

mark the Mears era with a degree of mediocrity that may be undeserved. Much like the Syracuse game where Tennessee fell two points shy, many of the Southeastern Conference runner-up finishes came as a result of one or two point losses.

The Mears era at the University of Tennessee can be remembered for a variety of reasons. Mears elevated the conference and national status of the Tennessee basketball program. Prior to Mears arrival in April of 1962, Tennessee had only six winning seasons in the previous twelve, and the 1961-62 team had suffered through a terrible season winning only four while losing nineteen. Mears quickly reversed the losing trend and immediately established Tennessee as a respectable basketball team in the Southeastern Conference as well as across the nation.

The winning seasons are only part of the story that accompany the Mears era at Tennessee. The growth and development of a quality major college basketball program takes on many fronts and Mears understood this aspect as well as any coach. Creating interest in basketball at Tennessee, especially considering the storied football tradition at the school, was no easy task, but Mears accomplished it. Attendance at the basketball games in Knoxville swelled throughout the first few years that Mears was coach. This caused an expansion of the basketball arena's seating capacity and even this expansion did not meet the seating demands of the spectators. This aspect of Tennessee basketball is somewhat contradictory. The style of play preferred by Mears during his first decade as Tennessee coach was a slow, deliberate style, one that is generally not considered enjoyable for spectators. Mears may have had this in mind when he began the sideshows that were associated with Tennessee basketball games in Knoxville. The flashy warm-ups and circus atmosphere, which earned Mears the nickname as the "Barnum of College Basketball," may have been Mears' response to his incorporating the eastern style of basketball which he learned under Claire Bee. Mears made use of unicycles and bear

wrestlers to not only work the crowd into a frenzy, but to also draw the crowds into the arena. Additionally, the antics served the underlying purpose of unnerving the opposing coach and players. Mears thought that his teams would gain an advantage using these maneuvers; a coach or player that is unnerved may not think or play as well as they would if they were not distracted by unusual environmental factors.[139]

It may not be a fair assessment to remember and judge Mears by his sideshow antics. A. W. Davis thinks that Mears possessed a well-rounded package of coaching abilities that enabled him to be successful at Tennessee. Davis says of Mears, "He's a great organizer. He knew moment to moment what was going to take place. Nothing in a game plan was left unturned. Everything was always covered.... the ability to motivate people, the ability to promote out in the community. It takes all those things to put that package together. You have to be able to coach on the floor, but you have to be able to get the outside community involved. You have to make your players think they are going to win. He was able to do all those things. He was a very demanding person, but at the same time the players saw that he was giving the same effort or more effort than the players.... he was not asking any more than he was willing to give. So when you are in a situation like that and you put all those reasons together..... the guy is going to be successful."[140] Davis describes aspects of Mears that were many times overlooked by members of the media and fans. The sideshows made for entertaining newspaper stories, but they were far from the foundations for success Tennessee enjoyed under the direction of Mears. Hard work and dedication combined with an overall understanding of what was necessary to develop a basketball program carried Mears farther than his well-documented circus antics.

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[139]Ibid.

[140]A. W. Davis, Interview with author, 4 April 1996.

In the area of coaching strategy Mears has not given himself enough credit. He says that "strategy wise I was probably average. I think that my strongest area as a coach was as a motivator."[141] Mears is speaking modestly when he uses this description of his abilities in the area of strategy. The match-up zone defense he used with so much success at Whittenberg and Tennessee is a complicated and effective defense. The match-up zone has to be adjusted for each opponent's offense. The defense requires the players to perform athletically as well as cognitively when involved with its execution. Mears and Tennessee utilized this zone as their basic defense for several years and it proved successful. This would not have been the case if Mears had been lacking in the area of strategy. He had to design and adjust the zone for each game and during games. A difficult task, but one at which Mears was adept.

Offensively, his ball-control slower tempo posed problems for the traditionally faster paced offenses of many Southeastern Conference teams. This eastern style of offense that placed emphasis on ball-control and that often caused the other team to make a mistake had positives and negatives. It worked well with the defensive philosophy employed by Mears, but it may have hindered recruiting. Even though Mears did recruit some quality players to Tennessee, the slower paced offense and the Mears' system of usually playing only six or seven players a game may have had some drawbacks. Highly skilled high school basketball players eager for playing time and scoring opportunities may have rejected Mears and the Tennessee basketball program for another university.

All the aforementioned attributes that characterized Mears molded him into being a supreme competitor. This drove the man to develop a single minded pursuit, winning basketball games. Mears was on a mission as a basketball coach. His devotion to the pursuit of winning was never questioned. Ben Byrd describes this as the most significant

[141]Ray Mears, Interview by author, 12 June 1996.

factor in the reasons behind Mears' success as a coach. Other coaches took it as poor sportsmanship. Roy Skinner, the former Vanderbilt coach, refused to speak to Mears for several years due to the style coach Mears was and the coaching tactics Mears used.[142] The Mears style did not make for congenial relationships with every fellow coach.

Mears' experiences at Miami of Ohio proved invaluable for him in the area of coaching. The pride that he saw associated with the Miami football program made an impact upon Mears as a student at that university. He recognized the importance of the pride that was involved with Miami's football program and saw how pride and spirit worked in conjunction with developing and supporting a winning athletic team. During his stay at Tennessee Mears attempted to instill pride into the university's basketball program. He was fortunate that a successful and tradition-rich football program existed. The existence of a successful athletic team with a proud tradition and university support had a carryover effect into developing a successful basketball program. The elements needed for developing a strong basketball program were entrenched to a large degree at The University of Tennessee prior to Mears arriving, but he was the one to make use of these elements.

The community support that the university's football team enjoyed eventually carried over into support for the basketball program. Mears urged the creation of groups such as the Orange Tie Club that fostered community support for Tennessee basketball. The Orange Tie Club was a group of local business people who were avid supporters of the team. Members of the club attended games, both home and away, promoted the basketball program and held regular luncheons centering on a Tennessee basketball theme.

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[142]Jerry Tipton, "Ex-Vol Villain Ray Mears to Haunt Cats Saturday," *The Lexington Herald*, 24 November 1994.

The community support for Tennessee basketball became quite strong during the Mears' era and provided needed impetus for a growing and winning basketball team.

If there are areas that Mears' ability can be questioned it may be in the areas of recruiting and his team's lack of post season success. As for recruiting, it is a game within a sport and there are no rewards for second place in the recruiting battles. Mears did bring in some high quality recruits. Ernie Grunfeld, Bernard King, and Mike Edwards were all highly recruited by many major colleges when they came out of high school, so it is not to say Mears did not bring in any high caliber and nationally rated high school basketball players. The question is why did he not bring in more of them? The qualities he possessed as a coach should have carried over into his being a more successful recruiter. His dedication, work ethic, and creativity were qualities that should have aided in recruiting. Tennessee's lack of tradition probably worked against him in the area of recruiting as did the social climate of the time.

During his early years at Tennessee Mears had to recruit using his own merits as a recruiter because the Tennessee basketball program lacked national recognition as a traditional basketball power. Therefore, as Mears attempted to expand the recruiting base he found it difficult to attract high profile athletes from other states. Mears' early success at Tennessee was due to the local talent available, recruiting players utilizing his Ohio connections, and developing marginally talented players into skilled performers.

During his first decade at Tennessee it was difficult to attract highly skilled African-American basketball players to Southeastern Conference teams, including Tennessee. This placed conference teams on unequal grounds when competing against teams from around the nation which had African-Americans on their rosters. Additionally, Mears was recruiting against the major college basketball power houses, UCLA, Michigan, and Kentucky. It was difficult to out-recruit these established programs for the

services of a high school player. How close did Mears come to signing players that eventually went on to lead other universities to basketball success? This is difficult if not impossible to answer, but it is an important point to consider. During the 1970's Mears did change offenses in an attempt to aid recruiting. Perhaps recruiting did improve following this shift. Grunfeld and King signed with Tennessee, but would they have signed without the offensive changes? Several factors are involved in the recruitment of high school athletes. Mears understood these factors and put forth effort in attempts to sign quality high school basketball talent.

Mears' post-season record is less than spectacular. His Tennessee teams were winless in three trips to the NCAA. The one point loss to Dayton in 1967 and the two point loss to Syracuse in 1977 were losses to quality teams with talent equal to the Tennessee teams they defeated. However, Tennessee's 1976 loss to VMI in the NCAA was an embarrassing loss. Even with King sidelined due to injury, Tennessee should have easily defeated the weaker Cadets of VMI.

Mears' health was a major problem during his career at Tennessee. During his last three years as Tennessee coach his health worsened. Mears was not with the team for long periods of time during these years. When he was directing the team, was he physically capable of providing the necessary leadership? This is a complex problem with no simple answer. The team chemistry problems during the 1976-77 season could have been attributed to Mears' health problems.

Mears was controversial in many areas, but it is difficult to find many negatives concerning his career as Tennessee's basketball coach. During 16 seasons as Tennessee coach his teams finished in the top three in the Southeastern Conference basketball standings and went to six post-season tournaments. He finished his coaching career with a record of 289-128 as Tennessee coach and a lifetime record of 411-151. His winning

percentage of .747 was second among active coaches, trailing only North Carolina's Dean Smith.[143] Mears' influence over intangible aspects of the Tennessee basketball program and the overall athletic program at the University of Tennessee are more difficult to measure. He likely had a tremendous influence on the promotional side of Tennessee sports. The promotions associated with basketball no doubt had carryover effects into other sports. The slogan "Big Orange Country" remains to this day associated with Volunteer athletic teams. His outfitting of players and coaches in orange blazers, much frowned upon at the time, has been adopted by Tennessee teams in other sports, and other schools have copied the tradition using their own school colors. The pre-game circus type exhibitions of various types that Mears incorporated, though not directly copied, have influenced other basketball programs. Bands, dance teams, and other exhibitions are regularly associated with college and professional basketball games.

In conclusion, the results of the Mears' era at the University of Tennessee were positive. He did what he was hired to do, win basketball games and improve a sagging basketball program. The high degree of success that University of Tennessee basketball enjoyed under his direction was due in large part to his qualities as a coach. The Tennessee basketball team's rise to Southeastern Conference contender and champion are just part of the legacy surrounding the Mears' era at Tennessee.

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[143]Ben Byrd, "Ray Kept To The Basics," *The Knoxville Journal*, 7 March 1978.

Epilogue

Ray Mears is presently fully retired and living in the Knoxville area. Following his employment at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, he accepted the position of Athletic Director at The University of Tennessee, Martin in 1980. He was full-time Athletic Director at UT Martin until 1989 when his status was changed to Athletic Director Emeritus. He left UT Martin in 1992 after improving the competitive level of the UT Martin athletic teams. Mears attends Tennessee athletic events in Knoxville and continues to support Volunteer athletics. He recently acquired a tattoo with the slogan "Big Orange Country Forever" printed on his wrist. His residence includes an orange room which contains an extensive amount of athletic memorabilia from his era as Tennessee coach. The city of Knoxville has recognized Ray Mears by naming a city street after him. Ray Mears Boulevard is located in West Knoxville.

The continuing development of the game of basketball at The University of Tennessee is due in large part to the influence of Ray Mears. Fan support of the Volunteer Basketball Program during the Mears' era likely assisted the building of Thompson-Bowling Arena, one of the largest on-campus basketball arenas in the country. The spirt associated with Tennessee athletic tems has been enhanced through the work of Ray Mears. Thousands of fans now dress in orange clothing as they support various Volunteer athletic teams.

Mears' influence extends to individuals as well. Several former players and assistant coaches have gone on to either play professional basketball or to coach at various levels. Ernie Grunfeld played professionally and is now the General Manager of the New York Knickerbockers. Bernard King and Tom Borewinkle had long and productive playing careers in the National Basketball Association. Howard Bayne, Red Rollins, A.W. Davis, and Ron Widby played in the American Basketball Association. Rodney Woods, A.

W. Davis, Pat Robinette, Phil French, Mike Edwards, Johnny Darden, Jerry Parker, Tommy Bartlett, and Stu Aberdeen have coached at either the high school or college level.

Ray Mears sensed the potential for a successful basketball program at The University of Tennessee and utilized an existing fan interest in collegiate sports to build a successful basketball program. His influence in the sport reached to the Southeastern Conference level and possibly even further as he consistently fielded competitive teams at The University of Tennessee. Mears' efforts in the sport of basketball continue to support the potential for a premier basketball program at The University of Tennessee

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