



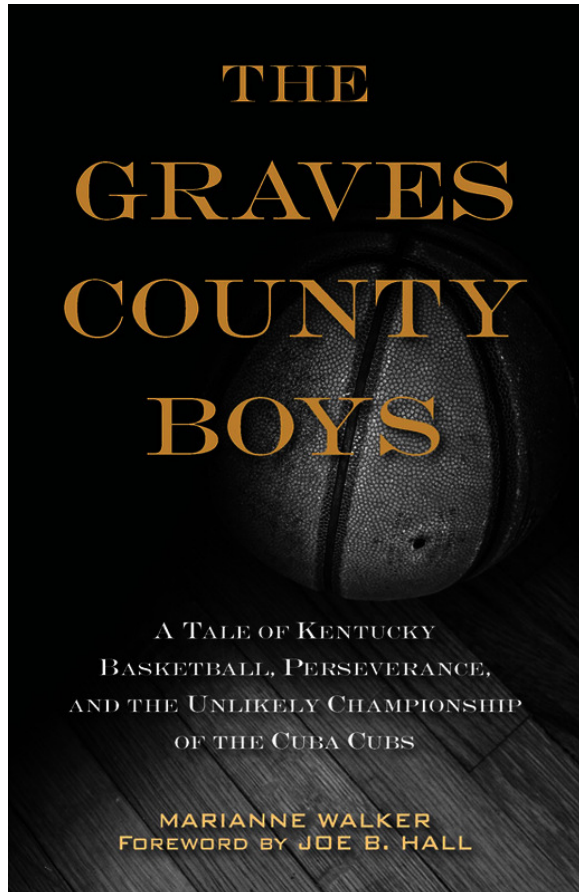
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DAILY NEWS

'Will inspire you to achieve against the odds'

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"The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball, Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs," by Marianne Walker. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky, 2013. 237 pages, \$21.95.



"The governor and many others recognized that the difference between the Cubs and their more cosmopolitan contemporaries was not just in their manners, dress, and speech, but in a much deeper sense," Marianne Walker writes in her new book, "The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball, Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs."

"The Cubs had a kind of Old World, frontier-spirit ruggedness about them that was distinctive and admirable," she writes. "The way they persisted, and the way they played and worked together as a team, reflected their pioneer background. More thrilling perhaps than anything else was the way the Cubs' wins came in games where they had to come from behind. Many times when playing a team that was hailed as invincible, the Cubs would trail until the fourth quarter. The Cubs were always determined to win and many times their sheer will-power pulled them through to victory."

Many Kentuckians will recognize the following names: Howie Crittenden, Doodle Floyd, Jimmie Webb, Donald Poyner and Bill Pollock. As

teammates on the Cuba Cubs, they pulled off one of the biggest upsets in basketball history when they defeated Louisville Manual to win the Kentucky high school championship in 1952. Much more than a sports story, "The Graves County Boys" is a tale of how a community came together for one brief moment to capture the imagination of an entire nation.

As former University of Kentucky coach Joe B. Hall notes in the preface, "This book is a lesson in life. It highlights the importance of dedication and determination, both of which require hours and hours of hard work in order to master certain techniques and to develop individual strengths."

Walker is a retired professor of English and philosophy at Henderson Community College. Her previous books include "Margaret Mitchell and John Marsh: The Love Story Behind Gone With the Wind" and "When Cuba Conquered Kentucky: The Triumphant Basketball Story of a Tiny High School that Achieved the American Dream." She has also written for The New York Times and The (Louisville) Courier-Journal.

“The Graves County Boys” is comprised of 26 chapters and can easily be digested in a couple of sittings. Above and beyond the story at the heart of the book, Walker provides a slice of Americana – a sentimental look at a bygone era that many rural Southerners of a certain age will find nostalgic and even romantic. A key feature I found especially appealing was Walker’s inclusion of more than a few vintage photographs that serve to bring the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Many of the pictures look like they came straight out of one of my grandparents’ old shoe boxes – you know, the ones they kept on the top shelf in the back of their bedroom closet, filled with childhood memories and family snapshots.

I found their coach, Jack Story, to be one of the most remarkable and thought-provoking individuals I have ever had occasion to stumble across in print. Witness this eloquent glimpse – one of many Walker provides – into his character: “Some mornings the coach would stop at one of the stores to talk with the men who gathered there. He would have a glass of milk; he never drank coffee, believing it was unhealthy. Jack would leave in time to be at school when the buses arrived. He taught civics and math classes in the morning; in the afternoon, he coached the varsity basketball team and taught physical education. His days were full.”

Those familiar with Kentucky’s rich cultural history will find the book endearing on many levels. Covering two basketball seasons at the beginning of the 1950s, the tale Walker weaves brings the main characters to life in an interesting and provocative manner; her literary prowess is on display on virtually every page. By the time you get to the culminating event – the Cinderella moment toward which the entire narrative slowly inches forward – you feel as though you know the players and their coach like they were members of your family.

In describing the 1951 season, in which the Cubs were defeated by Clark County 69-44 in the championship game, Walker includes several anecdotes that many locals will find insightful.

“Present in the audience the night Cuba won its second round in the state tournament games was Ed Diddle, coach of the Hilltoppers men’s basketball team at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green,” Walker writes. “One of the most successful coaches in the country, Diddle was also one of the best loved and the most colorful. He was noted not only for waving a red towel during every one of his games, but also for his quirky manner of speech. He would tell his players such things as ‘Line up right here in a circle.’ “

Finally, I appreciated the fact that Walker included an epilogue in which she tells how the lives of each of the players and their coach progressed in the decades after their monumental accomplishment on the basketball court. As might be expected, all of them did quite well. It turns out that the same sense of dedication and hard work that served them so well in their athletic endeavors also helped them to achieve success and happiness in their careers and personal lives.

The bottom line: If you are looking for a story that will inspire you to achieve against the odds or if you are looking for a reason to believe in yourself when everyone around you seems to have written you off – then you need to rush to the nearest bookstore and pick up a copy of “The Graves County Boys.” You will not be disappointed.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*