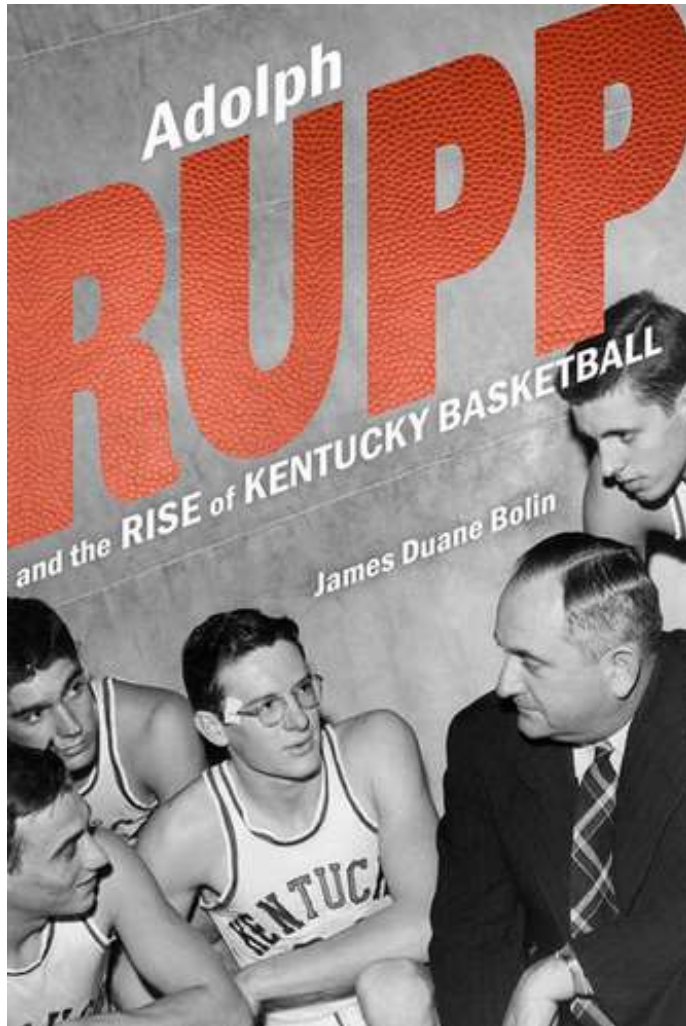


Bolin delivers balanced treatment of UK legend

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“Adolph Rupp and the Rise of Kentucky Basketball” by James Duane Bolin. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019, 432 pages, \$40 (hardcover).



“Rupp was at once an exceptional character and an ordinary individual,” James Duane Bolin explains near the beginning of “Adolph Rupp and the Rise of Kentucky Basketball,” his recently released treatise on one of the most imposing titans the basketball world has ever produced. “He concerned himself primarily with the bottom line, winning college basketball games and making a life centered around a rectangular hardwood court.”

“Other coaches have mirrored his self-centeredness and gargantuan ego – if only on a smaller scale – again and again in a cut-throat environment where such attributes of superiority seem to be necessary for success,” Bolin continues. “But the dreams, hopes and prayers of any coach ultimately depends on the skills and determination of young athletes. A coach’s ability or inability to relate to players can translate into wins and losses. Rupp had his own way.”

Those of you intimately familiar with Rupp’s style will no doubt immediately recognize that last assertion as one of the biggest understatements of all time. Rupp was not what you might call a “touchy-feely” kind of

coach. His primary means of motivating his players was to instill within them a deep sense of fear coupled with a healthy dose of contempt. Bolin accurately captures Rupp’s approach in the following passage: “Bill Spivey, a seven-foot All-American at UK in the early 1950s, said Rupp ‘was unique. He wanted everybody to hate him – and he succeeded. He called us names some of us had never heard before.’”

“Rupp” is meticulously researched (not unexpected given Bolin’s stellar academic credentials and larger-than-life reputation as a scholar), with 38 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the Introduction, 14 chapters and Epilogue that form the architecture for this comprehensive exploration of a subject many in the commonwealth take almost as seriously as they do their religious convictions. The book also includes a 24-page black-and-white photo album in the center that helps to bring the text to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. I spent a considerable amount of time perusing these vintage pictures that span not only his coaching career, but his entire life as well.

As is usually the case with this kind of biography, it is the details of Rupp's early life that I found most intriguing. I am always interested in the seemingly irrelevant private and personal childhood experiences that contribute to success in later life – especially with extraordinary individuals such as Rupp. Many of the stories Bolin recounts during this time in Rupp's upbringing reminded me a lot of those told by my grandparents; witness the following from "The Halstead Years, 1901-1919," the inaugural chapter and one of my favorites:

"The Rupps bought their first automobile sometime around 1915, but they still depended on a horse and buggy for the trip to the high school, seven miles away in town. During Adolph's junior and senior years, the children avoided the daily buggy ride by renting rooms in town during the school year. Elizabeth remembered that Henry got a job in a meat market and Adolph worked long hours in the grocery store to earn the rent money. All of the children went home on the weekends to help on the farm. During the harvest, farm work took precedence over school work. Superintendent William Thompson postponed the start of the 1918-1919 school year, Adolph's senior year, until September 9 because of 'the demand for labor.'"

Not being a particularly devoted fan of the sport in general or the teams profiled in this exhaustive and insightful volume in particular, I was nonetheless impressed by the author's seemingly innate ability to draw the reader into his narrative at almost every turn.

It would be hard to digest this manuscript without developing an enthusiasm for the monumental contributions of Rupp to intercollegiate athletics on multiple levels. At the same time, Bolin was careful to present an accurate portrait of Rupp, blemishes and all, an individual who was also a product of the times in which he lived and worked. His views on race, for example, are the focus of the 11th chapter, "Rupp and Race," which provides a balanced treatment of the issue at hand. Remember, Rupp was in the national spotlight during the height of the civil rights movement.

"Regardless of all that testimony (of his supporters), some of the evidence against Rupp is damning," Bolin writes. "His language at times suggested at least a troubling attitude toward African Americans, even if that language was common for the times in the South. According to Alexander Wolff's book 'Raw Recruits,' Rupp called Jimmy Breslin, at that time a young sports reporter for the New York Journal-American, in the early 1960s and asked him to 'kindly indicate 'colored' high school players with asterisks so Rupp would know where not to bother to send his recruiters.' It is unclear whether he made this remark so that he wouldn't waste time recruiting blacks or because he simply wanted to know if a player was black."

Bolin is professor emeritus of history at Murray State University. His previous books include "Home and Away: A Professor's Journal, Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky, 1880-1940" and "Kentucky Baptists, 1925-2000: A Story of Cooperation."

"After games, Rupp held court in his hotel room wearing red silk pajamas," Bolin notes near the end of the book. "According to (Jim) Host, he always had student managers provide sacks of White Castle hamburgers and bottles of Lowenbrau beer. For the Baron, only bourbon whiskey would do. Members of the press would all sit on the floor and Rupp would sit in a big chair."

I really enjoyed this one and my guess is that many readers – especially in this part of the country – will want to add it to their bookshelves. Highly recommended.

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