



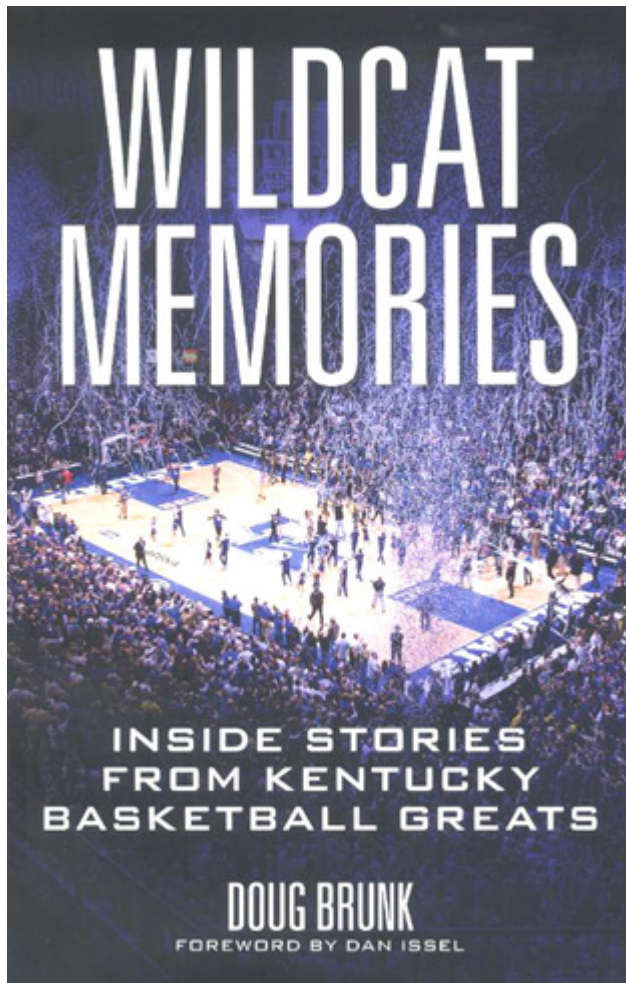
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'Ode' to those who made UK basketball a dynasty

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"Wildcat Memories: Inside Stories from Kentucky's Basketball Greats" by Doug Brunk. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014, 266 pages, \$17.95.



"The allegiance of Kentuckians to UK basketball is larger than life, a wide-reaching bond established long before cell phones, Internet connections, and social media," Doug Brunk explains in the Introduction to "Wildcat Memories: Inside Stories from Kentucky's Basketball Greats," his new book about the evolution of the collegiate sport most often associated with the Commonwealth. "The program's rich history and success – especially during Coach Adolph Rupp's forty-two-year tenure – are well chronicled."

"But another layer to the relationship between Kentuckians and UK basketball deserves exploration," he is quick to add.

It is readily apparent from the onset that providing this 'other layer' is the driving force behind this exquisite foray into the personal lives and adventures of those who played, coached, or followed the game through the cascading decades since the dawn of the 20th Century. The literary style of the book is innately seductive; the interviews Brunk conducted are presented as first person accounts from the point of view of the individual being interviewed. This gives the prose an intimate flavor that personalizes the stories in

a uniquely engaging manner. You feel as though you are sitting in the room listening to these key figures in UK basketball lore as they explain what their association with the game meant to them on multiple levels.

For instance, in the chapter devoted to Johnny Cox, who scored 1,461 points for UK during three seasons in the late 1950s, I found his personal 'take' on the profound influence the game had on his life to be amazingly insightful as well as indicative of the transformative nature basketball often has on those who managed to play it so well.

"I had no idea how good I could be as a player because nobody ever told me," Cox confesses as he reflects on his days as a high school player. "I had to figure it out on my own, so I practiced and played. Back then, most high schools in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky had good basketball teams. The main support I had came from my parents. They didn't know much about basketball, but they supported my interest in it."

“When I was a senior at Hazard High School we competed in the 1955 state high school championship basketball game and won,” Cox continues. “That game was played in Memorial Coliseum. That brought recognition my way. Because of my success I was offered scholarships from a number of schools, including UK, Eastern Kentucky University, Western Kentucky University, Morehead State University, and the University of Miami in Florida.” He then goes on to talk about his impressions of Coach Adolph Rupp and Coach Harry Lancaster, which I found to be both revealing and somewhat shrewd. Athletes, it seems, tend to see things in a distinctive and fascinating manner that non-athletes are challenged to fully appreciate.

“Wildcat Memories” consists of thirty-two relatively brief chapters arranged in four major sections: “The 1920s – 1950s,” “The 1960s – 1970s,” “The 1980s – 1990s,” and “The 2000s – 2010s.” The text is liberally illustrated with over thirty black-and-white photos, many of which those steeped in the history of U.K. basketball will no doubt appreciate. And although I do not fall into the ‘dyed in the wool’ league of dedicated followers, I nonetheless found the stories Brunk provides to be highly entertaining and even provocative.

The author is an award-winning journalist who has written hundreds of articles for trade and consumer publications. Originally from Rochester, New York, he grew up in Wilmore, Kentucky; a hardcore Wildcat fan, Brunk has degrees from Point Loma Nazarene University and the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. It is obvious he knows his way around a keyboard. He currently lives in San Diego with his wife and yellow Lab; rumor has it he is still trying to perfect his jump shot.

Another chapter I found particularly interesting was the one about two-time All-American Kyle Macy, who played for UK at the same time I was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee. As many readers are no doubt aware, Macy led the Wildcats in steals during the 1978-79 and 79-80 seasons and was floor general during the NCAA National Championship game in which UK beat Duke 94 – 88. I enjoyed his description of the impact playing for UK had, and continues to have, on his life.

“The loyalty of Big Blue Nation is hard to explain,” Macy explains. “You almost have to live through it to get a feel for how loyal and sincere fans are and how people love basketball in Kentucky. Of course, UK basketball fans had an impact on me, and they still do. As a member of the Lexington community, the relationship with fans persists.”

Perhaps Ryan Clark, the author of a couple of books including “Game of My Life: Kentucky Wildcats,” say it best. “The key to books about Kentucky basketball is picking the right folks and getting good interviews, and Doug Brink has done that,” Clark notes. “‘Wildcat Memories’ does a great job of finding people who may not have gotten the recognition they deserve – people who were behind the scenes, but still had a hand in developing on of the greatest athletic programs in all of sports.”

Full disclosure: When it comes to institutional loyalties in the sports arena, mine tend to lie with WKU and Tennessee, the two places I spent my formative years. I did, however, find “Wildcat Memories” to have a kind of universal appeal. Although UK serves as the backdrop for these wonderful testimonials to the power athletics has over our collective psyche, I believe anyone who understands how sports unites us all at a deeper sense will love Brunk’s ode to those who helped make UK basketball such a dynasty. Pick up a copy today!

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