

# Coach Don Haskins, 78; Advocate for Equality

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 Tuesday, September 9, 2008

Don Haskins, a hard-nosed basketball coach who made sports and civil rights history when, as coach of the Texas Western Miners, he led the first all-black starting lineup to the 1966 national championship, died Sept. 7 at his home in El Paso of congestive heart failure. He was 78.

In the championship game at Cole Field House in College Park, Texas Western defeated an all-white Kentucky Wildcats team, coached by the legendary Adolph Rupp and ranked No. 1 in the nation.

The movie «Glory Road» (2006), with Josh Lucas as Mr. Haskins, told the Texas Western story. It was preceded by a book of the same title written by Mr. Haskins with Daniel Wetzel, and it sparked renewed interest in one of the great coaching careers in college basketball history.

Texas Western College -- renamed the University of Texas at El Paso in 1967 -- had a superb team few knew anything about. It came into the 1966 NCAA tournament ranked No. 3 in the country, with a 26-1 record.

With five black starters and two black reserves, the Miners defeated the Wildcats, 72-65. They also defeated Rupp, a symbol -- along with University of Alabama football coach Bear Bryant -- of segregated Southern athletic teams.

Recalling the '66 team 25 years later, Mr. Haskins told The Washington Post: «That wasn't the first time I'd started five blacks, and I really didn't think it was all that unusual. What made it so is that Rupp had an all-white team and didn't make a secret of how he felt about it.»

Mr. Haskins got his nickname, «the Bear,» not only because he growled and grumped a lot but also because of his burly physique. The fact that he threw a player out of practice one day for trying a behind-the-back pass and once kicked a chair so hard he broke a toe only added to his ornery ursine image.

«Lord knows, I hated that man when I first started playing for him,» said Nevil «the Shadow» Shed, a native of the South Bronx who played on the national championship team. «He really got after us, but he never killed our spirit.»

Donald Lee Haskins was born in Enid, Okla., on March 14, 1930, and was a standout basketball player at Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University). His coach was Hank Iba, who was known for his disciplined offense and suffocating defense.

Mr. Haskins modeled himself after Iba but came to realize that the inner-city players he was recruiting, who played a more exuberant brand of basketball than the patented Iba style, required a change of strategy.

«He had these Maseratis he was trying to run like Volkswagens,» Shed said. «He realized that wasn't going to work.»

Mr. Haskins started his coaching career in 1955 in Benjamin, Tex., population about 250, where

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he coached six-man football and boys' and girls' basketball. He coached at other small Texas towns before arriving at Texas Western in 1961.

«I went into coaching because I didn't know how to do anything else,» he told Sports Illustrated in 1999. «Being some guy in Peoria at a desk, punching a time clock -- I knew I didn't want to do that.»

He thrived in an out-of-the-way place by recruiting players from across the country who, like Shed, had fallen through the cracks. His diamonds in the rough included future NBA stars Tim Hardaway, Nate «Tiny» Archibald and Jim «Bad News» Barnes.

«Haskins had the hardest recruiting job in America,» Michael Wilbon wrote in The Washington Post in 1999. «His job was to talk kids from big cities like Chicago and Detroit into coming to a school they never heard of in a town on the edge of nowhere.»

He had opportunities to leave over the years. Both college and professional teams occasionally offered him three times the salary he was making at UTEP.

He retired in 1999 after 38 seasons. He had a 719-353 record and won seven Western Athletic Conference championships. He took the Miners to 14 NCAA tournaments and to the National Invitation Tournament seven times and was an assistant coach for the 1972 Olympic team. He was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1997.

Survivors include his wife, Mary Haskins of El Paso; three sons; and three grandsons.

It was only in retrospect that the game for which he is best known came to be recognized as a social landmark.

«I feel this game was probably the Emancipation Proclamation of 1966,» Pat Riley, head coach of the National Basketball Association's Miami Heat and

a guard on the '66 Kentucky team, said during the end credits of «Glory Road.» «It wasn't until history started to talk about this game in that context that we realized that we were part of something that was bigger than just five blacks and five whites.»

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