

CHC- Legendary Coach Roy Skinner

by Bill Traugher

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This past January 27, a brunch was held to honor former Vanderbilt head coach Roy Skinner. The tribute was to the winningest basketball coach in Commodore history. Skinner was also recognized a few hours later at halftime of the Vanderbilt/Mississippi game. Former players, managers and assistant coaches surrounded him. This is an interview with Skinner from 2005.

The Vanderbilt basketball program has found success over the decades dipping into the state of Kentucky for prospects. Maybe the best basketball product from the Bluegrass State to the Vanderbilt campus is Roy Skinner.

Skinner is the all-time winningest basketball coach in the university's history. Born in Paducah, KY, Skinner began his collegiate coaching career at Paducah Junior College where he played basketball. Skinner later played basketball and earned a degree from Presbyterian College in South Carolina.

A class at Nashville's George Peabody College changed his life.

"I was in a coaching basketball class that Bob Polk (Vanderbilt head basketball coach) taught and got acquainted with him," Skinner said recently from his Brentwood home. "Vanderbilt had a real good freshmen team in 1956-57 and I was coaching at Paducah. Vanderbilt had a player from Heath, KY near Paducah."



Roy Skinner

"And because of that player, Polk agreed to have his freshmen play my junior college team. We beat them in Paducah, and that was the only game their freshmen team lost all year. That did impress Polk. Then his assistant got out of coaching and I applied for the job. Two or three months later he hired me."

The duties that Skinner absorbed were freshmen team coach, scouting and attending high school games scouring for prospects. In just his second year (1958-59) on the Commodore staff, Skinner was thrust into the title of acting head coach.

Just weeks before the season was to begin, Skinner and Polk were in Kentucky watching a prospect in a game. Polk suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized for two months. The 28-year-old Skinner temporarily replaced Polk for that season.

"Shoot no, I didn't feel any pressure," said Skinner when asked about feeling pressure that year. "I had confidence and some real good coaching along the way. I was ready for them."

In Skinner's lone year as acting head coach, Vanderbilt recorded a 14-10 (SEC, 8-6) season. Two years later, Polk retired from Vanderbilt and Skinner was given the head-coaching job.



"I was tickled to death," Skinner said. "To have the opportunity and chance to take it over, I just couldn't wait to get started. I was so young. I didn't know what was going on. I was a fast break, more like Kentucky running style coach. Run and gun and play a little defense in between. The offense was the main thing with me."

In Skinner's first three seasons his teams were 12-12, 16-7 and 19-6. Skinner, 76, said it was difficult to recruit at that time because of the tough

academic requirements of Vanderbilt.

"We beat Kentucky down here in 1964," said Skinner. "That was our biggest win that year. In fact they were ranked No. 1 in the nation when they came in here. They had just beaten Georgia Tech and we knocked them off. That was by far the biggest win for me. We hadn't beaten them in three years."

One player that Skinner sought locally was David Lipscomb High School's Clyde Lee. The center entered Vanderbilt and became a basketball legend for the university. Lee holds all of the school's rebounding records.

"It was not difficult as far as the grades to recruit Clyde," Skinner said. "He was an excellent student and qualified. It was a little difficult because so many schools were interested in him. But I had the inside track being here real close.

"Of course, I worked as hard as I could at it and ended up winning. At that time it wasn't that big because he wasn't that good. He had the potential to be and certainly developed into an outstanding player."

With Lee at center, Vanderbilt won its first SEC championship in 1964-65. The Commodores went 24-4 with an SEC record of 15-1. The only SEC loss was at Tennessee.

"I know I had some real good players and that was the reason for our success," said Skinner. "One of them was Bob Grace whose nickname was "Snake." I recruited him in 1961 and he graduated in 1965. He was from Hopkinsville, KY. He wasn't that good a prospect, but he had the potential. Bob had good speed, good hands and he developed into an awful good player. He had some other good ones to play with him."

Vanderbilt won its first game over DePaul in their first round of the NCAA Tournament. Next was a bulkier Michigan team led by All-American Cazzie Russell. With less than a minute remaining, Michigan led by one point. Vanderbilt's John Ed Miller drove for a basket that was disallowed due to a traveling call.

The basket would have given the Commodores a one-point lead. Michigan eventually won 87-85. If Vanderbilt had won that contest they would have vaulted into the Final Four where UCLA became national champs. Skinner vividly remembers one of the most controversial calls in Vanderbilt history.

"The referees cheated us," said Skinner. "He made a traveling call on John Ed Miller and John Ed did not travel. I looked at the film probably 150 times and there's no doubt about it. But that's all hindsight and they beat us by two points in the last few seconds. If we had scored, we'd win by one point. I'm sure of it."



In 1966, Skinner stunned the SEC with his recruitment of Perry Wallace. Wallace was a black athlete from Nashville's Pearl High School. He was the first black to play basketball in the conference. Wallace was not Skinner's first attempt to recruit black players.

"I don't remember what year, but the Chancellor told me that Vanderbilt was open to black athletes," Skinner said. "I had contacted several black players before Perry and had a few to visit the campus. Because of the academics, and they were mostly from the North, they were skeptical going to the South and SEC with no blacks.

"I didn't come close to getting any until Perry came along. He was a straight-A student and I practically lived with Perry. I worked awfully hard on him.

"I got some petitions and the university got several petitions. I don't have any idea how many signatures there were, but one was from some alumni that were not in favor of us recruiting a black player. I only took that with a grain of salt. There wasn't anything they could do about that."

Skinner led the 1973-74 Vanderbilt team to its second SEC title behind Jan van Breda Kolff. He had been coaching for 25 years when he suddenly retired in 1976. Skinner said he was physically and mentally worn out. He entered the insurance business after leaving Vanderbilt and retired after 20 years. Skinner won the SEC's Coach-of-the-Year award four different times (1965, 67, 74, 76).

The team that most Vanderbilt fans enjoy beating is the Tennessee Vols. That is a

true Vanderbilt basketball rivalry. But, Skinner initially looked past the Vols in his early coaching years.

"With me it wasn't," Skinner said when asked if the Vols were the team he aimed for each year. "I was at Vanderbilt as the coach before I realized that because of our alumni people, that I needed to concentrate more on Tennessee. But, to me beating Kentucky--that was it!"

Skinner said that his biggest and most memorable Kentucky game was in 1963, a 69-67 victory in Lexington. He said it had been years since a Vanderbilt team achieved a win on the Wildcats home court.

Playing Kentucky meant that Skinner had to face Adolph Rupp at least twice a year. The perennial SEC champs were always tough with the discipline and tradition of the Wildcats.



Roy Skinner and Adolph Rupp

"He was extremely nice to me," Skinner said about Rupp. "I remember going up to Lexington to a baseball tournament. He was in the hospital and had gotten out of coaching. Rupp was forced out. He didn't want to leave.

"I think he was 72 at the time. I went by this hospital room and every other word was a cuss word. He was so bitter at Kentucky for firing him, which is what they did. All through the years he was extremely nice to me--except for games."

Throughout Skinner's coaching career at Vanderbilt, he was able to recruit some of the finest shooters in the SEC. Some of the

fantastic players that have donated to the Commodore tradition are Jeff Fosnes, Terry Compton, Tom Hagan, Joe Ford, Thorpe Weber, John Ed Miller and Butch Feher.

"I had too many," laughed Skinner when asked to single out his best pure shooter. "One of the first was Keith Thomas. He was a super player. I tried to recruit a teammate of Keith's out of Louisville, Kentucky that went to Wake Forest. Keith was real young and coming.

"I tried to get him at first for a thousand dollars scholarship, and then a one-year scholarship. His parents had the money so that wasn't the biggest thing. His dad told me he wasn't interested in a one-year or partial scholarship that he was going to DePauw University in Indiana. But, I took Keith Thomas and he turned out to be an outstanding guard."

In his 16 years at Vanderbilt, Skinner compiled a record of 278-135 (63.3 pct.).

Skinner's Memorial Gym record was an amazing 181-41 (81.5 pct.). Skinner was asked about the "Magic of Memorial."

"The thing that got me, we won most of our home games," said Skinner. "Somewhere along the late 1960s, early 1970s newspapers starting writing about it and coaches started complaining about us winning our home games. There were charges of referees with home cooking.

"Referees bent over backwards not to home cook and I felt like we got screwed several times. They were trying to show they weren't partial to us because of the uproar. It's a super place to play basketball."

Next week read about the 1951 Vanderbilt championship in the SEC Tournament. It is their only title ever including the modern period.

Traughber's Tidbit: Kevin "The Whistler" Stallings has been around some great coaching minds in his career. Stallings high school coach of Collinsville High School near St. Louis was Vergil Fletcher who was a 2004 inductee of National High School Athletic Coaches Association. As a player for Coach Gene Keady's Purdue teams (1980-82) the Boilermakers made three postseason appearances and one NCAA Final Four trip in 1980. After becoming an assistant coach under Keady (1983-88), Stallings joined the staff of Kansas coach Roy Williams for five seasons (1989-93).

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com.