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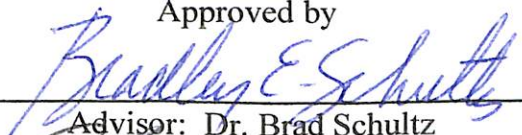
100 YEARS OF HOOPS: FOUR PLAYERS' PERSPECTIVE OF OLE MISS MEN'S
BASKETBALL HISTORY

by
Whitney Tarpay

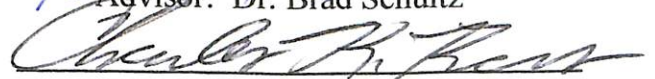
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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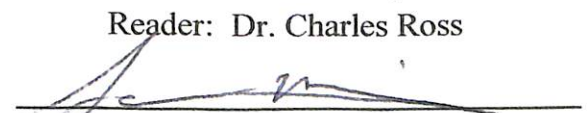
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ABSTRACT
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Basketball's History**
(Under the direction of Dr. Brad Schultz)

This thesis explores the past 100 years of Ole Miss Basketball and the role it plays in the University's athletics and student-athletes' lives. Through in-depth interviews with four former players, the study focuses on significant eras in the program's history and how that person's story fits in with Ole Miss history. After the research was conducted, it could easily be seen what Ole Miss basketball meant to that person during their collegiate career as well as the present. It can be concluded that although Ole Miss basketball does not have a powerful program in terms of national championships, conference titles or nationally-recognized players every season, the program still holds meaning to former athletes and is searching for its identity at Ole Miss and in a powerful athletic conference.

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CHAPTER I

PREFACE

For 77 years, the Southeastern Conference has been a powerful force in athletic competition with over 169 national champions, 784 Academic All-Americans and 20,000 All-Americans in its 20 sponsored sports¹. Although football is where the league receives most of its national recognition, men's basketball has also had its shining moments.

Most schools in the SEC began playing organized basketball games around the 1890s and late 1900s. Originally the member organizations were part of the Southern Conference, however, in December 1932, 13 of the schools south and west of the Appalachian Mountains reorganized into the Southeastern Conference. Sewanee, Georgia Tech and Tulane eventually left the league, while Arkansas and South Carolina joined in July 1991.

Since 2006, the SEC has made more NCAA Tournament appearances than any other conference with 27. In 2007, the SEC recorded an 11-4 mark in the NCAA Tournament, in which the conference only had five teams compared to the Atlantic Coast Conference's seven and six teams from the Big East¹. However, the ACC has had at least one team in the Final Four in 17 of the last 22 years. It has also won more NCAA Titles than any other conference since 1981 with eight and has produced more No. 1 seeds in the tournament than any other conference with 27².

In the SEC, Kentucky is historically the powerhouse in men's basketball. With seven national championships, 44 SEC regular season titles, 26 SEC tournament championships and numerous All-Americans, there is no doubt that Kentucky is the most

successful program in the league. That has helped the Wildcats create an almost cult-like fan base. Over 407,000 fans have attended Kentucky games in one season. The most to ever watch a game is 24,465 on Feb. 10, 2007, when the Wildcats faced off against the Florida Gators³. Kentucky has also had its share of great athletes, but is famous for legendary coaches. Adolph Rupp, Joe B. Hall, Eddie Sutton, Rick Pitino and Tubby Smith all helped the Wildcats earn SEC titles and all but one coach led them to at least one NCAA National Championship⁴.

In all-time record standings in the SEC, Kentucky ranks number one in both total wins (1,948 as of 2008; also ranked first nationally) and winning percentage (.762)¹. Arkansas and Alabama come in at two and three, respectively. Arkansas has been playing basketball for 86 years to hold a mark of 1,487 wins and 821 losses⁵. After joining the SEC in 1991, the Razorbacks earned their first and only NCAA championship under the winningest coach in Arkansas history Nolan Richardson⁴. The school has also won the league tournament once in 2000 and regular season titles in 1992 and 1994.

Alabama, more traditionally known for its historic football background, has a record of 1,482-898 with one tie⁵. In conference play, Alabama trails Kentucky for most SEC wins and SEC tournament wins. The Crimson Tide has had 40 players enter the NBA and currently has six on active rosters as of 2008, including Robert Horry, Gerald Wallace, Mo Williams, Jermareo Davidson, Antonio McDyess and Richard Hendrix⁶.

Tennessee, Vanderbilt and LSU are the next schools in the ranking. Combined, these three schools have 22 SEC regular season titles and five SEC tournament titles. All three have enjoyed recent success and are more regularly seen on a national scale. Tennessee had some of its best years from the 1960s to the 1980s under head coaches Ray

Mears and Don Devoe, and great players like Ernie Grunfield, Bernard King, Dale Ellis and Allan Houston⁴. Its recent success comes from the coaching and wild antics of Bruce Pearl. Offering student-athletes the best of both worlds in athletics and academics, Vanderbilt has had no trouble finding great athletes. The Commodores have been able to build success on the play of players such as all-time leading scorer Phil Cox, all-time three point leader Ronnie McMahan and Will Perdue, the 11th pick overall in the 1988 NBA Draft⁴.

There is no doubt that LSU is known across the nation for three of its basketball alums: Pete Maravich, Shaquille O'Neal and Bob Pettit, each of whom has been listed on the NBA's "Fifty Greatest Players" list⁴. LSU's success also comes from coach Dale Brown, who is one of only two SEC coaches to have won conference championships in three different decades⁴. Mississippi State, Florida, Auburn, South Carolina and Georgia round out the rest of the SEC's men's basketball teams with winning all-time records.

With 11 out of the 12 SEC schools mentioned with winning all-time records, only one school consistently struggles to find success: the University of Mississippi. At 1,108 wins and 1,183 losses, Ole Miss is the only school with a winning percentage under .500⁴ and without a conference regular season championship title.

Although the Rebels have not found the success in the wins and losses column, the team's has had other success on the court. Ole Miss has had many individuals make their own history by setting themselves apart. Every school has an all-time leading scorer, rebounder and assist leader. However, some players at Ole Miss have a unique story that some schools can't claim as one of their own.

The following chapters consist of interviews with four former Ole Miss players that show that although the school did not win much during these players' collegiate careers, each left an impact in the big picture of Ole Miss history. Don Kessinger was a two-sport All-American for the Rebels on the hardwood and the baseball diamond. Coolidge Ball broke the color barrier at the University to be the first black athlete to sign a scholarship. Gerald Glass is Ole Miss' only first round draft pick in the NBA Draft, and Keith Carter was a member of the 1998 team that was defeated by the year's Cinderella story in Valparaiso.

In 2009, Ole Miss celebrated its 100th anniversary of men's basketball. The stories of these four players help give a richer picture of the program's history that can't be told simply by wins and losses.

CHAPTER II
INTRODUCTION

It was a day when basketball history came together.

It brought together 100 years in one day. It brought together 2,286 basketball games in one day. The day was to honor the 462 players whose lives revolved around the hardwood during their collegiate career.

On February 21, 2009, the University of Mississippi basketball program celebrated its “First 100 Years.” This was a day for the University to honor its history and the tradition of Ole Miss basketball.

But what tradition?

On this day of celebration, 6,994 was the counted attendance, which is a total not in the top three for this season’s home attendance. Why did the fans not come out in strong numbers? Yes, this year’s team was down because of injuries to the backcourt and that day’s opponent Georgia did not boast a strong conference record, but what Ole Miss fan wouldn’t want to see the program’s greatest and most popular players recognized?

Like many of the fans, several former players also chose to stay home. Out of the 19 players selected to the All-Century Team who signed autographs before the game and were presented at halftime, only nine players came to the event. Of course, some of the players had passed away, but B.L. “Country” Graham and Denver Brackeen were represented by family members. Some had coaching obligations, like all-time leading scorer John Stroud, whose girl’s basketball team made it to the state tournament, fourth all-time scorer Elston Turner, who currently coaches in the NBA, and high school coach Rahim Lockhart (represented by his wife). Some are still playing basketball, like Justin

Reed and Ansu Sesay. One used to be a head coach here and might have hard feelings after being let go, like Rod Barnes.

Nonetheless, only nine showed up from those selected as some of the best players in Ole Miss history. Even more telling, only a handful of former lettermen came to share in the spotlight.

Expectations for the evening were high, especially considering how far the University had gone in celebrating the football team's recent win in the 2009 Cotton Bowl. Surely, the halftime presentation of the All-Century Team and past letter winners would impress the crowd. Throughout the whole game, the announcer gave warnings of the lights going off at halftime. The suspense was rising.

Halftime came, and the lights went out once the teams left the floor. Past pictures of the individuals on the All-Century Team flashed on the screen one by one. After all 19 had passed, a picture of Tad Smith Coliseum came next. Then the lights returned. The nine players plus family representation of the team were on the floor. Their names were announced and each gave a wave. After them, the rest of the letter winners in attendance came onto the floor.

In less than 10 minutes, the presentation was over. The celebration had ended.

One hundred years of Ole Miss basketball fit into one half of a basketball game.

Does it say that Ole Miss doesn't have much tradition in the sport? It could.

Does it say that the history of Ole Miss is seen more for its losses than its wins?

Possibly.

Does it say that no one cares about Ole Miss basketball? No.

Although the “First 100 Years” celebration did not fill Tad Smith Coliseum or cover the floor with former players, Ole Miss basketball does mean a lot to many people that have been involved in the program. Ole Miss needs to find the right plan to help it succeed and find its identity on campus and in the Southeastern Conference.

CHAPTER III
BACKGROUND HISTORY

The University of Mississippi played its first organized basketball game on January 28, 1909. The contest between the Rebels and Memphis Physicians was played on an outdoor court located behind the Lyceum on the Ole Miss campus. The celebration of a 7-6 halftime lead by Ole Miss was cut short when the Physicians pulled out a narrow 12-11 victory.

In that first season, Ole Miss found itself with a 0-4 record heading into the last game. However, the Rebels decided to save the best game for last as they recorded their first victory with a 28-11 win over Mississippi College.

In the following 13 years, Ole Miss had mediocre success. The team had seven wining seasons, and like many teams the school did not schedule any games in the 1917-18 season due to students fighting in World War I.

In 1922, Ole Miss joined the Southern Conference, which helped it find some winning ways. Under the first three years in the conference, Ole Miss collected a winning season every year. Coach R.L. Sullivan, who coached three years prior to joining the league along with the first three after, posted a winning season every year during his six-year tenure. The Mississippians continued with that success under his successor Homer Hazel. After rattling off victories over N.C. State, LSU and Kentucky, a 31-30 win over Auburn made Ole Miss Southern Conference Tournament Champions. Coach Hazel's team finished the 1928 season 10-9.

The school's time as a member of the Southern Conference did not last long, as in 1932 Ole Miss along with the other 12 schools reorganized to form the Southeastern

Conference. Upon joining the conference, Ole Miss started out as a bottom dweller in the rankings with eighth, 11th and 10th place finishes, respectively, in the first three years.

The next real taste of success after the 1928 season came in the 1937-38 campaign. The Rebels finished with a 22-12 overall record and an 11-2 mark in SEC play, good for second place in the league. That finish was the highest that the program would ever reach until the conference split into Eastern and Western divisions in 1991. Ole Miss contended for the SEC Championship title, but lost 58-47 versus Georgia Tech. This season also saw Ole Miss gain its first All-American in B.L. "Country" Graham. Graham led the SEC in scoring with a 17.4 average, which made him the first player to ever average more than 17 points a game in the SEC. In the conference tournament, he scored 71 points in three games and had a single-game high of 27.

With such a great season behind them, it would seem that the Rebels could finally get on the track to reach great heights; however, after the 1937-38 year, Ole Miss was on the wrong track and headed right back to the bottom.

After only recording one winning season between 1938 and 1949, Ole Miss hired one of its own to take over the program. Former Rebel All-American Graham stepped in to hold the reigns. As head coach, Graham only had three winning seasons out of the 13 years he was there, but he collected 145 wins, which is still the most out of any Rebel coach.

During his tenure, Graham saw his teams score the most points by an Ole Miss team with 118 against Union in 1953, post the program's 400th victory by defeating Vanderbilt in 1955 and receive two more All-American selections in Denver Brackeen,

who was named the Associated Press' SEC Most Valuable Player, and Joe Gibbon, who became the second player in SEC history to average more than 30 points.

But winning was still not coming the Rebels' way. From 1961-70, Ole Miss won 88 games, which is the fourth lowest in school history for one decade and the lowest in one decade where games were played all 10 years. Although the teams had minimal success, the 1960s will be remembered for Don Kessinger becoming the third All-American selection in 1964, reaching the 500-win mark in 1965 and getting a new home in Rebel Coliseum in 1966. The Coliseum would later be named after then-Athletics Director C.M. "Tad" Smith.

In the late 1960s, another former Rebel cager entered as head coach. Cob Jarvis, who played under Graham in 1951-54, took over in 1968 and was able to get three winning seasons in a row from 1971-74. Jarvis tallied 87 wins in his career, which stands as the third most in the program's history.

Three years into heading the program, Jarvis recruited Johnny Neumann Memphis. In the 1970-71 season, Neumann led the nation with a school-record 40.1 scoring average, which stands behind only LSU's Pete Maravich's three legendary seasons in the league's record books. Neumann still owns five of the top six single-game scoring marks in school history. After earning All-American accolades for his efforts on the court and the classroom, Neumann left school after one season to join the professional ranks.

A team's ultimate goal is to win championships, and it took Ole Miss 53 years to earn its first and only SEC Tournament Championship. Coach Bob Weltich was in his fifth year at the helm, and the Rebels entered the tournament ranked sixth in the league.

With players like SEC and school assist leader Sean Tuohy and the fourth all-time leading scorer Elston Turner, the team was able to defeat Tennessee, Vanderbilt and Georgia to take the title. It also marked the school's first NCAA Tournament appearance, but the celebration ended quickly with a 69-66 loss to Kansas in the opening round.

The rest of the decade continued to be similar to the ones before with little success. Ole Miss did finish second in the league in the 1982-83 season under coach Lee Hunt as well as fifth in 1989-90 with Ed Murphy as coach. The Rebels did qualify for the National Invitation Tournament four times after its championship season.

Although the 1980s didn't bring many wins, the decade did see many players receive recognition for their efforts. Rebel all-time leading scorer John Stroud earned All-American honors two years in a row. Forward Carlos Clark earned AP All-America honorable mention following his junior year in which he scored 21.1 points per game. Guard Rod Barnes was also named All-America honorable mention after he became the first player in Ole Miss history to record 500 points, 100 rebounds and 100 assists. After finishing his two-year career at Ole Miss with 1,564 points, forward Gerald Glass received All-American honorable mention accolades in his junior and senior seasons.

In the late 1990s, the ball started rolling the right way for Ole Miss. After winning a total of 27 SEC games in a six-year span, the Rebels snapped an unlucky streak in 1997 when the team upended No.3-ranked and defending national champion Kentucky 73-69. The upset snapped the Wildcats' 14-game win streak and propelled the Rebels to their first top-25 ranking in school history as they jumped to No. 20 in the AP poll. That season began an unprecedented Rebel run of six straight postseason appearances and back-to-back SEC Western Division championships.

At the end of the 1997-98 season and earning the second division title, Ole Miss earned its highest seeding in the NCAA Tournament at No.4. However, a heartbreaking loss in the opening round to No. 13 Valparaiso turned the good from that season sour. Although his senior season may not have ended how he wanted, forward Ansu Sesay was named a consensus All-American and received SEC Player of the Year honors.

Things seemed to keep going up for Ole Miss. During 1999 postseason play, the Rebels earned their first NCAA Tournament win against Villanova. They were once again cut short, though, with a loss in the second round to Michigan State. At the end of the season, Ole Miss added another player to the All-American list with Keith Carter taking the honor as a senior.

Although the 2000s are not over, the past nine years have seen the Rebels collect more wins than any other decade in program history with 163. During these years, Ole Miss has two SEC Western Division titles (in 2000-01 and 2006-07), five winning seasons, two NCAA Tournament appearances (including a trip to the Sweet 16), two NIT appearances including a trip to the Final Four at Madison Square Garden, another All-American in forward Rahim Lockhart and a national ranking as high as No. 9. Fan popularity also seemed to be rising with a surge of success. Out of the top 20 crowds in Tad Smith Coliseum, 13 of those came during this time period.

In summary, Ole Miss basketball has an all-time record of 1108 wins and 1183 losses. That total includes 40 winning seasons, 12 All-Americans, 30 players with more than 1,000 points in their careers, three SEC Players of the Year, five SEC Coaches of the Year and 38 All-SEC selections.

However, when playing in the SEC, to be a contender every season the program has to have better numbers. Ole Miss has the worst all-time record and is the only school with a losing mark. The program is the only one to not be a SEC Champion during the regular season. Ole Miss is also one of three schools to not get past the NCAA Sweet 16.

Ole Miss does not have a winning history, but that alone does not define a program. The men who played for the Rebels and the impact they had at Ole Miss testifies to the fact that they are the reason that Ole Miss basketball has lasted for a century.

CHAPTER IV
TWICE AS GOOD

Don Kessinger may not have known it at the time, but he was going to be one of the best athletes ever to play at the University of Mississippi. He may be one of the best athletes in SEC history. In 2007, the Birmingham News ranked him as the 12th best athlete to ever play in the conference.

But today tell Kessinger how great of an athlete he was at Ole Miss and he will humbly thank you. Kessinger feels that he is just a guy who owns a realty company in Oxford and used to play a little ball.

Play a little ball?

Kessinger did more than play a little ball at Ole Miss. He reached heights that not many two-sport athletes can even dream of accomplishing today. He did things that guys playing one sport today wish they could achieve.

As a two-sport All-American, Kessinger made history as a Rebel.

Growing up in Forrest City, Arkansas, Kessinger did a little of every sport in high school during the late 1950s. Always playing the sport that was in season, Kessinger played football, basketball, baseball and ran track. An All-American quarterback at Forrest City High School, Kessinger led his team to a football state championship, runner-ups in basketball and third in the state track meet.

When it came time for Kessinger to start the recruiting process in 1961, he was very fortunate not to have to choose one sport from the others. Instead, he got to keep two of his favorites—baseball and basketball.

“That was one of the deals,” Kessinger said. “Wherever I went, I was going to play both sports. The primary focus was that one day I was going to play, if I had the opportunity, major league baseball. As I looked at each school and as I thought hard about it, why basketball was important, I needed to make sure that baseball would help me to get where I hoped to be at.”

Why not focus on baseball if that was his main career choice?

“Because I loved to play basketball,” Kessinger said. “I really loved it. I thought basketball was fun. At that time, I just wasn’t ready to give that up.”

Being the talented athlete he was, Kessinger said he was very fortunate to have many offers to choose from for a collegiate career. The basketball guard/baseball shortstop said that being from Arkansas, he wanted to stay in the same geographical region for college to allow his parents to come see him play. With that in mind, he was able to narrow his choices to four: the University of Arkansas, Memphis (known then as Memphis State, which Kessinger admitted had a great basketball program), Ole Miss and Mississippi State. After exploring his options, Kessinger said he knew that Ole Miss was his first choice.

While at Ole Miss from 1962-1964, Kessinger excelled in both sports very quickly and made an impact that is felt more than four decades later.

Playing two sports so close in season, it would seem that practices and games would conflict. Kessinger said that the sports did overlap, but not to the extent that they do today.

“Back then, we didn’t play as many baseball games,” Kessinger said. “We may have played 30-something games instead of 50-something. We had a big overlap in terms of baseball practice and basketball finishing the season, but we didn’t have a major overlap in terms of games.”

Kessinger said that he wouldn’t have been able to pull off playing two sports if it wasn’t for his coaches willing to work it out. He continued by saying that legendary coach Tom Swayze in baseball and coaches B.L. “Country” Graham and Eddie Crawford were great to help him continue with his dream.

“They were just great,” Kessinger said. “Basketball came first until it was over. With baseball, I could go out before basketball practice sometimes and get my batting practice in or go later. We just worked around it. The coaches were fabulous to let me do that.”

Kessinger’s stock continued to rise throughout his time at Ole Miss. He was the first Ole Miss sophomore to gain All-SEC recognition and the first to achieve that honor through three varsity seasons on the hardwood. The Rebel became the first Ole Miss player to score 500-or-more points through each of his three varsity basketball seasons, 300-or-more points each season in SEC competition and average 20 points a game for three consecutive seasons. Kessinger averaged 22.2 points in 70 varsity games and 22.6 points in 42 conference games. He finished third in league scoring his sophomore season and second the rest of his career.

In baseball, Kessinger was setting the standard just like he did in his winter sport. He was an all-SEC shortstop as a sophomore, junior and senior. He hit a career average of .406 to set a new school record and tied the school record of 42 hits in a single season.

Kessinger was also the third Ole Miss diamond Reb to win all-SEC honors for three seasons. He was the first Ole Miss athlete to achieve unanimous recognition as an all-SEC member in basketball and baseball. To add to his accolades, Kessinger earned All-American honors in basketball and baseball. He became the first two-sport All-American at Ole Miss and he still holds that distinction today.

“I guess it means even more now than it did then when you really think about that,” Kessinger said. “It was just what I did then as far as playing both sports and doing the best you can at both sports. I think that I was very fortunate.

“I don’t think you could do that in those two sports today because of the time requirement of each sport. I was fortunate that the coaches let me do it, and it was easier then. As I look back, I think it does mean a great deal to me, and it meant a great deal to me then. I just feel even greater about it now looking back.”

When his basketball career came to a close, Kessinger had a lot to be thankful for. The guard had broken 18 school records and still holds some today in scoring, field goals made, field goals attempted and free throw percentage.

“I just shot a lot,” Kessinger joked.

His best shooting game came against Tulane in Oxford. Kessinger posted 49 points and shot 22-of-28 from the field.

“It was just one of those nights when I threw it up, it went in,” Kessinger said. “There were some other nights by the way, but we won’t talk about those.”

One thing that Kessinger will never forget is playing in what is fondly known as the Old Gym, which is now the Martindale building located on the Ole Miss campus.

“You would have to see it to believe it,” Kessinger said. “It was upstairs. It had a balcony. But what a great place to play as an Ole Miss player in front of Ole Miss fans. It was awful cozy. So it was really good when people got behind you there.”

Although Kessinger had many great memories from being playing Rebel hoops, when spring 1964 came to an end, he signed as a free agent with the Chicago Cubs. Even though he loved both sports, Kessinger weighed his options and decided that baseball would be the better sport to pursue professionally.

“In my mind, and I would still say this, I thought baseball was a better career choice because you could play it longer and, being very candid, back then that was where the money was,” Kessinger said. “You could get more money in the big league playing baseball than you could playing basketball. For me, it worked out really well. I was very fortunate not to play very long in the minor leagues and make it to the big leagues. It turned out really good for me.

“It was nothing about which sport I liked better. Back then, I wish I could still say this, but I was a skinny kid. Basketball would have been difficult for me to play that many games and get beaten around like they do. I just thought baseball for me was a better sport.”

On Sept. 7, 1964, Kessinger made his major league debut for the Cubs. The shortstop came into his own quickly, and by his third year in 1966 he was playing in 150 games while collecting 146 hits and 50 runs as well as batting .274, which is one of the highest averages in his career.

Although he loved playing baseball, Kessinger said that he definitely missed basketball. When a phone call from former Mississippi State coach Dave McCarthy reached Kessinger in Chicago, he was given a chance to have his other love back in his life.

McCarthy told Kessinger about a new basketball league forming outside of the National Basketball Association. Known as the American Basketball Association, McCarthy was named as a coach for the team being formed in New Orleans, and he wanted Kessinger to join the squad. McCarthy assured Kessinger that he could keep playing baseball as well.

“I almost did it,” Kessinger said. “I told them to send me a contract. It would have doubled salary because I would have been making as much in one as I was making in the other. My wife and I talked about it, and I was going to do it because I loved basketball.”

Kessinger continued to get advice from other baseball players and friends before making a final decision. Many of the players that he talked to knew others who played both sports professionally. Kessinger noticed a trend, though, with those two-sport athletes as most were pitchers in the majors and did not have to play in every game like he did as a shortstop.

“As I talked to more and more people, it just became reality to me that I would not give justice to either sport,” Kessinger said. “It would have beat me down. My career would have been shortened. Most of them just thought that it wasn’t a smart thing to do, and I think it was very wise counsel for me.”

Kessinger was very fortunate to have a stellar career in the major leagues. In his 16-year career with the Cubs, St. Louis Cardinals and Chicago White Sox, he had a .252

batting average, 1,931 hits and 899 runs. He also turned 1,215 double plays. The one stat that Kessinger is most proud of is the fact that he played in six All-Star games.

“When you go to those All-Star games and you sit in that locker room, you look around and realize that you are representing your league,” Kessinger said. “You begin to look around at all the great, great, great players, and you wonder what you are doing there.”

Kessinger continued by saying that he feels even more blessed because his first three All-Star games were not chose by the fans, but by his peers.

“To me, having the players that you play against everyday pick you as the best in your league as the guy that they wanted to represent them as the starting shortstop, that was a great honor,” Kessinger said.

Kessinger is a special athlete in Ole Miss history. Not just because he was good at basketball and baseball, but because he was able to play so well in two sports, which is something that today’s athletes would find almost impossible to do.

“I think unfortunately it starts in high school or maybe even junior high now days,” Kessinger said. “A young man is almost forced to select a sport because the coaches want their players year round now. To a degree, I think that is unfortunate. When you get to college in today’s world, I think you should focus on something. I think in high school, and there are still those that do, but it’s hard to play a lot more than one sport and certainly more than two. I think that there are those that still that can still play more than one sport, but it is really rare.

“A guy really wants to have to do it because it is hard work. You still only get one scholarship. I just think that the big thing now is that each sport has become year round.”

It’s hard to compare Kessinger to recent two-sport athletes like Auburn’s Bo Jackson or Florida State’s Deion Sanders. The standards of today are more rigorous, and stats can’t be compared since more college games are played today than the 1960s.

However, Kessinger’s accomplishments are still considered great today. Like Jackson and Sanders, Kessinger gave his full effort in every game and never put one sport in front of the other. Each athlete contributed to their team’s history, and Kessinger stands for a lot in Ole Miss history. With his All-American accolades and other accomplishments on the hardwood and the diamond, Kessinger could be seen as one of the best athletes to play at Ole Miss.

CHAPTER V
TRAILBLAZER

Walk into the Ball Sign Company in Oxford and it seems just like any small business. Its owner, Coolidge Ball, displays signs, decals and license plates that he can design for any special need.

Walk to the back of the small building and a different display is seen. The posters, trophies, awards and team photos exhibited on the wall show a different side of Ball—as a trailblazer and a leader for Ole Miss as it started a new chapter in its history by signing him as the first black student-athlete at the University in 1970.

Out of Gentry high school in Indianola, Ball wasn't sure if Ole Miss would recruit him. However, during his senior year, the forward was visited by Rebels' assistant coach Kenneth Robbins in Ball's hometown of Indianola and the two hit it off. That relationship helped Ball decide that he was interested in attending Ole Miss.

In February 1970, Ball came on one of his first official visits to Ole Miss when the Rebels faced off against SEC foe Kentucky. During this time recruiting rules were not as strict as today and schools were allowed to present the recruits to the home crowd at halftime. Visiting along with Ball was a white player from Louisiana.

“When I got introduced, I said to myself that this would be a good measuring stick of how well I would be accepted by having a white kid up here too,” Ball said. “So he stood up, and they read all his stats out. He got a nice applause. They read my stats out and said I was from the Magnolia State, and I got a bigger one. In the back of my mind, I said that this might be a place for me.”

Ball was not just getting a great reception from the Rebel fans that day, but also the players on the freshmen squad. During this time, freshmen players did not play on the varsity team, but instead played in games against other freshmen teams. During the varsity team's game versus Kentucky, Ball said that many of the freshmen members approached him to tell him that they have heard only good things about him.

Despite the warm feelings, Ball's college plans initially did not include Ole Miss, as he signed scholarship papers to play at New Mexico State. The Aggies were a team on the national radar in college basketball that finished the previous season in the Associated Press' Top 10 and got as high as a No. 3 ranking. Ball also had a friend, Sam Lacey, from Indianola attend New Mexico State. At this time, Lacey had just signed a \$1.1 million contract to play for the Cincinnati Royals. "I thought I wanted to go there," Ball said. "I went out there in the summer to work. When I got there, I said that this is not where I want to be."

Ball immediately put a call in to Coach Robbins at Ole Miss around the end of June. Robbins told Ball that there was one scholarship left, and when Ball returned to Mississippi, Robbins came to Ball's hometown to make him the sixth scholarship player that recruiting season. "That's how it all got started, and I have just been enjoying my time here at Ole Miss ever since," Ball said. "It was a good feeling."

Even before he signed with Ole Miss, Ball knew that if he came to Oxford he would be the first minority athlete. He said that this did not bother him much because he knew that if he could get along with his teammates and coaches, then he wouldn't worry about the fans or other students. Others were not so sure.

“Ole Miss fans in my hometown were excited because they knew what type of ball player I was,” Ball said. “There were some negativities (sic) with some of my classmates and people who knew me. They thought I was nuts for wanting to go to school here after all the stuff that happened.” Ball just answered back asking if they had ever been to the campus. When they answered that they hadn’t he told them that they didn’t really know how Ole Miss and what they heard was hearsay.

Although he was one of about 100 minorities on campus, the transition was smooth for Ball. He was nervous from not knowing what to expect, but once on campus, Ball’s personality fit right in with his teammates and other students. In his first two years, Ball roomed with white players before deciding to have his own room his last two years. “It just worked out beautifully for me,” Ball said. “I just thank God for where I was because I had a great career here, and I really enjoyed it.”

In his first season at Ole Miss, Ball turned in some of his best numbers, averaging 16.8 points and an impressive 10.3 rebounds per contest while also leading the team with 42 assists. He scored a career-high 30 points against Vanderbilt and LSU in his inaugural season, and added a career-high 19-rebound performance against Southern Mississippi. While being an instrumental part of the six-man freshman team, Ball helped lead that team to a 20-3 record. The freshmen also had numerous chances to play the varsity squad throughout northeast Mississippi at places like South Panola High School in Batesville and Northeast Community College. The freshmen won a majority of those games that year.

“My team was better because we beat them best four out of seven times,” Ball said. “They couldn’t stand that. They couldn’t wait for the next year because we would

all be on the same team. They would be like, ‘Man, when we get those guys on our team, we can really be something.’”

When Ball finally got to the varsity he helped Ole Miss defeat SEC rivals Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi State back-to-back in 1973. “My era of teams kind of got it started for Ole Miss with three varsity winning seasons, which hadn’t happened at Ole Miss that I know of,” Ball said.

In the record books, Ball ranks eighth in career rebounds with 754 and 26th in program history for career scoring with 1,072 points. He was named to numerous All-SEC teams every year, team MVP three years in a row, team co-captain in 1973 and team captain his senior year. Ball also got the chance to participate in the Pizza Hut Basketball Classic East-West All-Star Game in 1974.

But perhaps his biggest achievement was helping Ole Miss integrate its athletic department; a giant leap forward for a school that had experienced race riots on campus just eight years earlier. By the time he arrived on campus in 1970 Ole Miss and Mississippi State were the only SEC schools to not have minority athletes on their athletic teams. The Bulldogs also integrated that year.

“I didn’t realize how much of an impact it was going to be on Mississippi and me at the time,” Ball said. “I was just thinking about a good place to go to further my education and basketball career. I wanted to make an impact at where I went to school, and it just happened to be Ole Miss.

“Back then at 18 years old, you aren’t really thinking a lot about it. Everywhere you go people remind you of it. Now, I can see the results of what happened, and I’m so glad to help other minority athletes that came behind me.”

Ball's accomplishments on and off the court have given him a lot of recognition from the school, the state of Mississippi and fans. In recent years, Ball has represented Ole Miss as a Chik-Fil-A SEC Legend, at the SEC men's basketball tournament, as a member of the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and the Ole Miss Hall of Fame. He was also voted to the Cellular South All-Century Team. His image appeared on the logo for the celebration of 35 years of African-Americans in Ole Miss Athletics in 2005.

The spotlight has always been on Ball because of the barrier he broke. Ball knows that the attention falls on him, and tries to conduct himself in a positive manner to continue to be a role model for others.

"I always try to be nice to people because you never know when they can come back and help you out," Ball said. "That is why I always give interviews when somebody asks me for one and why I always talk to people in general. I have people come up to me and be like, 'Coolidge, I remember one time when you took time to sign an autograph for my son, and you talked to him. That just did a world of good.' I won't even remember it because it just comes natural to me."

Others also recognize his kindness. Ball remembers talking to an older gentleman that came to Oxford from Nashville the last time that Ball played Vanderbilt at Tad Smith Coliseum during his career. "He said, 'Coolidge, I have watched you through your career. You always carry yourself with class. If you ever need a job in the Nashville area, you make sure to come see me, and I will help you out.' So I thought that was pretty nice coming from another SEC school on how I conducted myself through my career at Ole Miss. It just made me feel good."

Ball deserves every great thing he has ever received. The Oxford resident is still involved with Ole Miss today as Ball served as M-Club President and holds season basketball tickets. Having someone of his character as an active alumni and image of Ole Miss basketball makes it even better that Ball broke the color barrier in 1970.

Ball understands his role in Ole Miss history. He proudly shows it off at his sign company with framed posters, MVP plaques, a crystal and gold replica of the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and souvenir clocks just to name a few. However, when talking to Ball about his memorabilia, he is quick to point out the accomplishments of other minorities that followed behind him, such as Peggie Gillom-Granderson and Jennifer Gillom, sisters that are women's basketball legends at Ole Miss. Ball knows that he paved the path for other minorities to succeed and is proud to show it.

CHAPTER VI
BREAKING GLASS

People say that glass ceilings and glass houses can be broken. One glass that could not be broken was former Rebel hoop star Gerald Glass.

Every night from 1988-90, Glass stepped on the Tad Smith Coliseum floor and used his scoring ability to shatter his opponents. He broke Ole Miss' own glass ceiling by becoming the first player to be drafted in the first round of the National Basketball Association's draft.

The road to Ole Miss for Glass took him in a different direction before leading to Oxford. Out of Amanda Elzy High School in Greenwood, the 6-6 forward was recruited by Ole Miss along with other Division I schools. Glass wanted to come to Ole Miss, but the Rebels used their scholarships on other players. That sent Glass to smaller Delta State, closer to his hometown. "I decided to go to Delta State because they had a pretty good program, and I liked the coach," Glass said. "They had a good team, so I signed with Delta State."

Upon arriving at Delta State, Glass made an immediate impact. He averaged 12.5 points and 6.5 rebounds per game his freshman season while leading DSU to a 23-8 mark. He was also named the Gulf South Conference Freshman of the Year. At the end of that first season head coach Ed Murphy got the opportunity to take over the program at Ole Miss and Glass figured he would go along with Murphy to Oxford. However, Murphy had other ideas. "He told me to stay another year and play over here," Glass

said. “He told me to see how things go under the new coach Steve Rives. So that’s what I did”

Glass did as he was advised, and he saw just as much success in year two at Delta State. Under new coach Rives, Glass averaged 26.1 points and 12.5 rebounds per game as he led the Statesmen to a 24-9 record and the NCAA Division II Final Four. Glass was named a Division II All-American, and finished sixth in Division II in scoring, fourth in rebounding and 19th in field goal percentage. Glass’ stock was rising, and he now felt like he was ready to move on to Ole Miss and the SEC.

“It was the best thing at the time for me because I dreamed of playing in the SEC,” Glass said. “I finally got the opportunity to do it, and once I got here, I just worked hard. It was a great opportunity, and I couldn’t wait to get the chance to play.” Glass’ chance to play would have to wait, though, as he sat out a year due to transfer rules. After the waiting period was over, Glass was about to shine at Ole Miss.

Even before Glass had played one second in a Division I game, the buzz surrounding the player had already started. Murphy believed so much in Glass’ ability that he was constantly talking about what Glass could accomplish. Media and coaches in the SEC took what Murphy said to heart and named Glass to pre-season All-SEC teams. The bar was set high for Glass.

Glass finished his junior campaign fourth in the nation and second in the SEC in scoring by averaging 28.0 points per game. No other player in the SEC probably meant as much to his team’s scoring total as Glass did for the Rebels in 1989. He was responsible for 36.9 percent of the Rebels’ total points, which was tops in the conference. He scored in double figures in all 30 games while totaling at least 30 points in 14 games. He also set

new school records for steals with 89, steals-per-game with 3, three-point field goals with 41, three-point field goal attempts with 109 and 51 dunks.

But of all that Glass accomplished that season perhaps nothing compares to the night he had on March 4, 1989 in Oxford as the Rebels hosted LSU. It was a duel between the SEC's leading scorers—LSU's Chris Jackson at No. 1 and Glass at No. 2. Back and forth the two went all night, seeming to swap baskets after each shot. Jackson would make one, then Glass.

“Before that game, I went on a stretch where I scored like over 30 points in nine straight games,” Glass said. “So one of my teammates before the game said, ‘Can’t nobody stop you. Why don’t you when you get the ball just look to score? If nobody there, can’t nobody stop you.’ So when I went on the floor that night, I just had this confidence I can’t describe.”

With LSU leading 110-107 in overtime, Glass hit a jumper to close the gap. Jackson quickly followed with two free throws. Glass then hit a trey to tie the game at 112 with 1:06 left. With 50 seconds left, Jackson missed a three-pointer, giving the Rebels a chance to run down the clock. Glass was fouled on a 14-footer by LSU's Dennis Tracey and his free throw would put the Rebels ahead 113-112. Jackson had one more chance with an off-balance 20-foot shot, but it bounced off the back of the rim to give the Rebels a win for the ages.

Glass finished the night with 53 points. Jackson had 55. No visitor had ever scored 55 points in Tad Smith Coliseum, and it was the first time in SEC history that two players scored 50 points in the same game. Only All-American Rebel Johnny Neumann

scored as many in a game for Ole Miss against Vanderbilt in 1971. Neumann and Glass are the only Rebel players to ever reach the 50-point scoring plateau in a single contest. “I can’t describe it,” Glass said. “I just felt relaxed, and everything I shot went in. I was just feeling good that night. That was probably one of the best moments of my career here.”

That performance was just in his first season at Ole Miss. He ended his junior year with 841 points to average 28.0 points per outing and 89 steals. Those statistics stand as junior records today.

Glass’ final season at Ole Miss saw similar success. He was named to numerous preseason All-America teams, including teams selected by *Playboy*, Billy Packer, Dick Vitale and *Sport* magazine. Ole Miss realized the value of the publicity and started a campaign to promote Glass as an All-American candidate. Posters, flyers and videos all showcased Glass’ talent and his nickname, “World Class.”

“That nickname came in high school,” Glass said. “I grew up in Greenwood in the Delta and we didn’t have much money. It was a poor school and we didn’t have any warm-ups. We would just come out in our uniforms. So we got these T-shirts, and everybody got a nickname put on the back. Well, I didn’t have a nickname. Everybody was coming up with different names, and they just weren’t good.

“So my cousin said, ‘What about ‘World Class Glass’?’ I said, ‘That sounded alright. Ok, let’s go with it.’ So I just put it on, and the name stuck. Everybody was calling me ‘World Class Glass.’ I came to college—‘World Class.’ Came up here—‘World Class.’”

The name followed Glass wherever he went. He even had “WCLASS” on the license plate of his 1987 Pontiac. Media and fans swarmed Glass wanting interviews and autographs. Glass said that it took some time to get used to the attention since he was a shy person. “Once I got to college, it got easier,” Glass said. “I could talk to people. It just takes time to get used to adjusting to the media and different people. It was fun. I enjoyed it.”

An All-American honorable mention selection in both of his seasons at Ole Miss, Glass led the Rebels in scoring, rebounding, field goal percentage, three-point percentage and steals in his two years in Oxford. Aside from his one-on-one battle in the LSU game in 1989, the one game that stands out that Glass will always remember is his last game at Tad Smith Coliseum against national powerhouse Kentucky where he got a triple-double. Glass recorded 34 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists in the 88-74 victory over the Wildcats.

In the record books, Glass scored 1,564 points, which is eighth all time in program’s history, and his 26.1 points per game is the second-highest scoring average behind only Johnny Neumann. Glass hit 326 baskets in his junior season, the second highest in a single season by any Rebel player.

“It was just an unbelievable ride,” Glass said. “I just look back, and I can’t believe how I was able to do what I did. Every night I would play hard, and I had a couple of good games.”

The ride was not over for Glass, though. All of his hard work at Ole Miss helped him become the 20th pick in the first round to the Minnesota Timberwolves in the 1990 NBA Draft. Glass became the first Rebel to be drafted in the first round of the draft.

“It was a big adjustment going to the pros, but getting drafted was an experience,” Glass said. “You grow up wanting to play professional ball, but when it comes, it goes so fast. You don’t really get a chance to enjoy it because when you are in the moment, you can’t sit back, look and say ‘wow.’ You just have to go through it.

“So once it all happened, I looked back on it and was like, ‘Wow, I got drafted.’ I looked at the tape at the actual draft and got to hear my name called. It was crazy. Once I got up there and started practicing with these guys, you realize how much you have to work.”

Out of all the memories he has made playing basketball, many of his favorites come from playing in the pros. Getting to play against Michael Jordan, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson is definitely in his top three favorite moments of all-time, Glass said.

“It was crazy,” Glass said. “I grew up watching some of these guys. Some nights I would sit there and find myself being a fan and cheering. I can’t even describe it—playing against Larry Bird in the Boston Garden, Magic in the Forum, in Chicago. It was crazy. I enjoyed it.”

In his six NBA seasons, Glass played in 201 games for the Timberwolves, Detroit Pistons, New Jersey Nets and the Charlotte Hornets. As a rookie, Glass set a Timberwolves franchise record for a reserve with 32 points off the bench versus the Los Angeles Lakers. His best season was his second year in the league with Minnesota where he had 859 total points to average 11.9 per contest and totaled 260 rebounds.

Today, Glass is back on the basketball court at Ole Miss, but this time he is not playing. He has returned to the school as a student and is helping the current team by serving as a manager and mentor to the players.

“It’s been eating at me my whole life,” Glass said. “I entered college wanting to pursue a degree, and I never finished. I had gotten to the point where once I finished my basketball career, I couldn’t stay involved in basketball without a degree. So finally I decided ‘Hey, it’s time for me to get back into basketball.’

“I had been working other jobs, working in casinos, doing different things. I just couldn’t find my niche. So I said that I’m going to get back into basketball. I called to see how far away I was from graduating. We worked it out, and here I am.”

Glass wants to be a role model for the players on the current squad by showing and telling them not to waste time while they are here.

“When I was here in school, I did what I could do, but I also wasted time in courses that I didn’t put in all the effort I could,” Glass said. “I could have had my degree by now, but like I said, I was distracted, and I had different things on my mind at the time. So I’m just letting them know that while they are here, take advantage of FedEx Academic Center and take care of your books.”

When it comes to Ole Miss basketball, Glass distinguishes himself from the rest. Not only does his career statistics stand out among the best out of the program’s 100-years history, but out of all the players that ever touched the hardwood at Ole Miss, he is the only one to be drafted in the first round of the NBA draft. Out of the 41 players drafted from Ole Miss, he is the only one to go first.

That feat gives anyone the right to be arrogant, but not Glass. The shy, humble kid from Greenwood still shines through today.

“I know what I accomplished—I was the only first round pick to come from Ole Miss—but I don’t look at myself as one of the best players,” Glass said. “I admire all the players. Everybody was good in their time. To me, everybody was good. I look back at John Stroud, Elston Turner, Johnny Neumann, Sean Tuohy, all those guys. I admired all of them.”

CHAPTER VII

2.5 SECONDS

All it took was 2.5 seconds.

In 2.5 seconds, 13,349 basketball fans' hearts went from pounding out of his or her chest to either excitement or heartbroken.

In 2.5 seconds, the team benches went from holding their breaths in anticipation to either tears of joy or disappointment.

In 2.5 seconds on March 13, 1998, Ole Miss and Valparaiso made history.

For Valparaiso, it was the biggest win in its program's history.

For Ole Miss, it let one of the best chances for basketball success slip from its grip and its program's history was changed forever.

The 1997-98 season went well for the Rebels. Ole Miss finished the regular season 21-5 and 11-3 in the SEC. That landed Ole Miss a No. 4 seed in the NCAA Tournament to play No. 13-seeded Valparaiso. The tiny school in northern Indiana had only a record of 10-9 at one point during that season, but went on to win its last 11 games to earn a tournament bid. The higher-seeded Rebels were favored by many to win the opening round game to move on in the tournament, and the team felt that confidence as well.

"We say that we didn't go in overconfident, but we were playing a No. 13 seed," said Keith Carter, an All-American guard for the Rebels from 1995-99. "Most of the time in the tournament, a four seed is going to win that game. We were a much better team

with a lot more talent. Bryce Drew (Valpo's top guard) was a great player, and they had some really good role players, but we might have gone in a little too confident."

The first two minutes of the game started in Valpo's favor. A layup from Antanas Vilcinskas and three-pointer from Drew helped put the Crusaders up 5-3. However, that would be the only lead that Valpo would hold until 5:22 left in the half. After a Mississippi timeout, the Rebels started a 17-8 point run that was highlighted by three-pointers from Carter, Michael White and Joezon Darby to gain a seven-point lead at 20-13, which was the highest of the game.

The first half continued to be a close game with Ole Miss leading most of the way. Valpo posted a one-point lead after an Ansu Sesay foul put Zoran Viskovic at the line to shoot two. Carter gave the Rebels a surge with eight points in 2:41 to lead the team to a 38-32 lead with 32 seconds left in the first half.

However, with one second left on the clock, Drew hit a turn around 18-foot shot from the top of the key to end the half at 38-34 in favor of Ole Miss. That last-second shot was a sign of things to come.

Out of the locker rooms starting the second half, things began to become uncomfortable for the favored Rebels. The Crusaders quickly found ways to score, including a shot from beyond the arc from Drew, and gained a 41-38 lead just 1:27 into the half.

Back and forth the scoring went, but the lead continued to lean toward Valpo.

"We let them hang in the game too long, and anytime you do that, the underdog gets confidence," said Carter. "If it comes down to a last shot, you saw what happened."

After trailing for 5:33, Ole Miss got the lead with 2:53 left to play after Rahim Lockhart's two made free throws. With 4.1 seconds left, Sesay was sent to the line after a Jamie Sykes' hold went against Valpo. The score was 69-67 Ole Miss.

"The thing I remember most and that is very vivid is the fact that Bryce Drew just missed a wide open three," said Carter. "I mean, he had a wide open one. It was a sense of relief, and Ansu got the rebound. We were up two and thought that Ansu will at least make one. I think we just kind of relaxed"

As Sesay stepped to the line, the Valpo bench anxiously awaited its fate while Ole Miss let a sigh of relief in thinking it would continue to the second round after this close call.

The first shot hit the back of the rim and bounced forward over the outside of the rim. Still 69-67. Valpo timeout. Sesay's next shot bounced off the rim to the left where the referee called the ball out on Carter.

"So it went out on me, and I turned to Coach (Rob) Evans because we had one timeout left," said Carter. "I turned to him and said, 'Coach, do you want a timeout?' He said no and to just get on the ball. So I was on the inbounds passer."

The Crusaders got one more chance with 2.5 seconds on the clock.

Sykes threw in the ball for Valpo. Carter noted that what is ironic about Sykes throwing the ball in is that he was drafted in the 11th round of the 1997 Major League Baseball Draft by the Arizona Diamondbacks as an outfielder, so Sykes had a good arm. A pump fake by Sykes got Carter off the ground and gave Sykes an opening.

“As the ball was in the air, it just seemed very surreal,” said Carter. “You just knew what was going to happen. I could see to myself that this wasn’t going to look good. (Bill Jenkins) jumps in the air and pitches all in one motion to Bryce Drew.”

The play was called pacer. Carter learned later that Valpo ran it every single day at the end of practice, and he heard that it probably worked 10 percent of the time.

All that matters, though, is how the play is executed in game situations and it worked perfectly against Ole Miss. Drew’s three-pointer was nothing but net. Buzzer. The scoreboard read 70-69. No. 13 Valparaiso defeated No. 4 Ole Miss in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

“It was just a helpless feeling,” said Carter. “When that ball went into the net, it was just disbelief. You look around at our team and all our fans, and everybody was just stunned. That’s why they call this March Madness. Stuff like that happens, and unfortunately, it happened to us.”

A victory for Ole Miss would have opened the door to a great situation for a run in the NCAA Tournament. No. 12 Florida State had upset No. 5 TCU 96-87, and the Rebels would have faced the Seminoles in the next round. In the second round, No. 8 Rhode Island defeated No. 1 Kansas 80-75. If Ole Miss had beat Florida State, the team could have played the eight seed in the Sweet Sixteen.

“So it was a really good chance for us to get to the Elite Eight, and it was kind of just thrown down the toilet,” Carter said.

Instead, Valparaiso lived the Rebels’ dream. The Crusaders defeated Florida State in the second round, but lost to Rhode Island in the Sweet Sixteen.

The saying that "time heals everything" was appropriate for the Rebels to think about after a heartbreaking loss. The real question, though, was how much time the players, or even Ole Miss fans, would need before they could move on from it.

"I don't think I watched the film for probably six months," Carter said. "Probably sooner than that, but not until the next school year because I didn't want to watch it. My dad to this day hasn't watched it. He just won't watch it. Then obviously they started showing it every March and I have seen it 100 times now.

Carter along with his other 1998 teammates may be able to watch the game and talk about it now, but it is something that Carter will never forget.

"It was just a deal where when it comes up, I will think about what we should have done differently," Carter said. "It's just something where you replay the game over and over in your head, and once I saw what happened, I saw Jason Flanigan guarding Bryce Drew, and he took his eye off of him for just a split second. That is all it took.

"There are so many things where you can look back at the last five minutes of the game and look to where we could have done this better or this better. But the bottom line is that we should have been up in the game by 10 or 12 points. They were a good team, but we were much better physically and talent wise. We let them stay in the game."

In 2.5 seconds, Valpo put a stamp on Ole Miss history that will forever be on the program's forehead.

"For basketball, this is what Ole Miss is known for," Carter said. "Obviously, the Sweet 16 in 2003 was great for those guys, and it was a huge accomplishment. But when you think Ole Miss basketball, this is what people think about. I played all over the

world, and when I tell people I'm from Ole Miss, they are like, 'Wait a minute—Valpo.' And I'm like, 'Yes. I was in that game.' That is what they talk about.

“As unfortunate as it is, that's what people remember Ole Miss about. Hopefully we can get past that. We probably won't because they are going to keep showing it every March, but that is what everybody wants to talk about—what happened in that game. I really think that team in '98 was one of the best teams for Ole Miss, and it's just unfortunate that we didn't get to go on farther.”

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Everyone has a story.

Some people may think their life story is not full of a bestseller's gripping details or have the interest level to catch people's attention. However, they still have a story to tell.

Ole Miss basketball has a story to tell.

Does it involve 11 national championship titles including seven-straight titles from 1967-1973 like UCLA? No.

Does Ole Miss have 55 All-Americans in its program's history and hold the distinction of having the most former players on NBA rosters like Duke University? No.

Do the Rebels have an all-time winning mark of 1988-634-1 and hold the distinction of being the winningest team in the history of college basketball like the University of Kentucky? No.

Does Ole Miss have notable alumni like Vince Carter and Michael Jordan to claim as one of its own like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill? No.

Ole Miss basketball may not have the storied traditions of national powerhouses, but it still has a story to tell.

The story lies in the people involved in the program. It is the Don Kessingers, Coolidge Balls and Gerald Glasses. It is people like those who gave so much effort on the court to help Ole Miss build a tradition. Night in and out, each one worked for a rebound, set a new school record or hit the game-winning shot. Their efforts toward helping Ole

Miss after their playing days ended makes the story even better. Today, former players can be seen as fans, managers, coaches, administration or even radio announcers.

The story can also be told from the wins and losses. Ole Miss obviously does not have a winning tradition. After 100 years the program holds an 1108-1183 all-time record. Even though the numbers tell a story by themselves, Ole Miss still has great wins in its history. Finishing sixth in the regular season and then winning the 1981 SEC Tournament is a great chapter in Ole Miss' story. Winning four SEC West titles is a great accomplishment. Jason Harrison sinking a deep trey in the final moments versus Notre Dame in the second round of the NCAA Tournament to carry Ole Miss into its first and only Sweet Sixteen is another great moment.

Football will forever be king in the South and at the University of Mississippi. With three national titles, six SEC titles, 32 bowl appearances and success of former players in the NFL, Rebel fans tend to gravitate toward football. It is also one of the oldest sports on campus and has 115 years of tradition.

Trying to compete with the popularity and revenue that football brings in is a tough task. It is hard to have people jump on the bandwagon if there isn't a reason for them to climb aboard. In sports, winning is the reason. At Ole Miss, winning is the reason.

In the big picture of Ole Miss athletics, basketball is still trying to find its place. It doesn't have that winning tradition. Like many other schools, including the national powerhouses, it has its ups and downs. Even though people will highlight the bad over the good, there are people that love the program. Whether they are Oxford residents,

students, former players, faculty, alumni or just Ole Miss fans, there are many that support the team through its adversity.

The Ole Miss basketball story is still continuing today with no end in sight. One day Ole Miss may have the details of championships and trophies to add to its writing. Ole Miss still has a chance to start its tradition and a new chapter in its history. The Don Kessingers, Coolidge Balls, Gerald Glasses and Keith Carters of Ole Miss believe that the Rebels will find their happy ending.

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