

## **The Racial Significance of the Rambler's 1963 Championship Team**

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By Joe Flaherty

Flashback to the early 1960's: gasoline was about \$.30 a gallon, Dwight D. Eisenhower was handing over the Presidential reigns to an upstart Democrat by the name of John F. Kennedy, and the nation was right in the thick of the African-American Civil Rights Movement.

At that time, Chicago was one of the most politically powerful cities in the nation. It was a booming metropolis in the northern United States, which was more lenient in terms of racial integration than the south.

But Chicago, while racially integrated, was dubbed "the most residentially segregated large city in American" by the 1959 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Mayor Richard J. Daley wanted his city to be built upon a foundation that was committed to racial segregation.

Public housing projects were being established in the city's black ghettos for the sole purpose of keeping them out of white neighborhoods. These ghettos were rampant with gang violence, shootings, drug abuse, theft, and abandoned buildings.

This government-mandated housing segregation of African-Americans created an intense racial divide, and tensions spilled over more often than not. Race wars and riots were a common occurrence on any given day, and could be started with something as simple as a fire hydrant being cut off in a black neighborhood.

Oppressed by law to these horrendous conditions, it was as if Chicago was growing into 2 separate cities: white Chicago, and black Chicago.

Based on the severity of that situation, it's hard to imagine any kind of racial integration occurring in Chicago in the 60's. But one college basketball coach was daring enough to assemble a team that not only included multiple black athletes, but also one that featured four of them in its starting lineup.

George Ireland, Loyola University Chicago's head coach of Men's Basketball from 1951 to 1975, was a pioneer in racial integration on the college basketball scene. While coaching in an era where many coaches operated by the motto, "play one black player at home, two on the road, and three if we're behind", Ireland felt no such obligations. He simply put the players on the floor that he felt gave his team the best chance of winning.

And if that meant using four black athletes from Nashville and New York, then so be it.

In 1963, Les Hunter, Vic Rouse, Ron Miller and Jerry Harkness started alongside Chicagoan Johnny Egan. That quintet led the Ramblers to a 29-2 regular season,

steamrolled through the NCAA Tournament, and captured a National Championship by defeating the defending champion Cincinnati Bearcats in a thrilling 60-58 overtime affair.

But this journey to the title had many obstacles, ones that usually didn't have anything to do with the play on the court. As a stern disciplinarian, Ireland would regularly chew out his players, sometimes in plain view of others. Taken out of context, a lot of his tongue lashings could be seen as racist.

For example, when one of the black players on the Rambler squad decided to grow a mustache as an expression of his culture, Ireland ordered that he shave it off. But it isn't as if he was singling out the black player because of what his mustache may have stood for, he was simply enforcing the team rule. In essence, what he said to that player was as far from racist as one could get: he simply saw him as another player on the roster, and every player had to follow the same rules.

Ireland was as tough as they come. But even though his tactics may have been difficult on the players, he gained their respect. The players on the team referred to him as 'the Man'. Two-time All-American Jerry Harkness once said, "He marched to his own tune. He had his own rules. And we had to follow 'the Man's' rules."

Another obstacle was public perception of his team that featured black athletes. Besides all of the verbal backlash he must've constantly had to deal with, he also had to find a way around government sanctions that could've prevented an all-white team from playing his integrated team.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the '63 NCAA Tournament, the SEC Champions Mississippi State Bulldogs were slated to face the Ramblers. But Mississippi State Police, under the direction of Governor Ross Barnett, intended to enforce an unwritten state law that barred any teams from Mississippi from participating in mixed-race competition.

But Bulldogs head coach Ed Jucker, along with Ireland, had other ideas.

Both men knew that in order to have a true National Champion, their teams would eventually have to play to determine who would move on to the next round. Shrouded by darkness after nightfall, the Bulldogs snuck out of the state and met up with the Ramblers at Jenison Field House in East Lansing, Michigan. There, they played what is known today as "The Game of Change".

The Ramblers won that game by a score of 61-51, but the game itself embodied a greater win for the Civil Rights Movement. That game signified a huge step forward in the process of racially integrating men's college basketball and college sports in general.

Even though this game and the decision by Coach Ireland to start four black players are commonly overlooked when considering how the college game became integrated, an argument can easily be made that the process would've taken much longer if this never

happened. We may be looking at a very different college basketball landscape today if Ireland never had the guts to pull in racially diverse talent from across the nation.

Legendary Texas Western head coach Don “The Bear” Haskins gets a lot of praise for being the “father” of racial integration on the college basketball scene. His 1966 championship winning team was the first to feature five African-American starters, and they defeated an all-white Kentucky team in the championship game.

But I believe that Ireland deserves more credit. Maybe not more credit than Haskins entirely, but at least the same amount. Given the racial conditions in Chicago in the 1960s, people must’ve thought he was insane to even try to start multiple black athletes.

And if “The Game of Change” were never to have happened, the stage might never have been set for Haskins to put together an entire starting lineup of black players. Without that pivotal match up in East Lansing, southern teams might have been forced to keep going along with those unwritten rules barring them from inter-racial competition. If that were the case, Haskin’s team probably wouldn’t have even been assembled knowing that they couldn’t compete with the all-white teams that were likely to appear in the NCAA Tournament.

It is admirable that Loyola is doing so much to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “The Game of Change”. Knowing more of the background to the situation makes it carry much more weight in the grand scheme of things. All things considered, that game, much like Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier in the MLB in the 1940s, can be seen as the turning point for racial integration at the college level.

And none of that could’ve been possible without the forward thinking of George Ireland.