the rebound, out to Conley ... and the Cats are on the run.”

Of course, there’s nothing like being there. Rodney Beck was a UK student in 1957 and present at Memorial Coliseum when Vernon Hatton sank a 47-foot set shot at the buzzer against Temple to send the game into the second of three overtimes, with Kentucky eking out the victory. When the final horn sounded, Beck remembers, “Everybody went crazy except Happy Chandler. Happy dashed out on the court and put his finger down on what he said was the exact spot where Hatton had shot. Then he called for somebody to bring him a nail and a hammer — and of course, he being the governor, they did it. Happy didn’t move his finger until he drove the nail into the hardwood at the exact spot Hatton had shot.”

On the day it opened in 1956, Freedom Hall was the greatest basketball arena ever built. It had odd dimensions, with the floor laid out long to accommodate the Kentucky State Fair’s horse-show ring. But the NCAA staged six championships in Freedom Hall, and the big barn helped coach Peck Hickman skyrocket his University of Louisville teams to national prominence.

Today, players are drawn from across the nation to be a part of what sportswriter Dave Kindred called (and used as a book title) Basketball, the Dream Game in Kentucky. But we’ve always got an eye out, too, for the next wonderfully named hoopster to come down from the hills, or up the street from the playground, to help make the game magic.

— Bill Doolittle

BECAUSE BELLARMINE WON THE DIVISION II NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP...AND A CHANCE TO PLAY DUKE

DEALING WITH THE DEVILS

— Josh Moss

One floor below the court, in the basement with the rickety painted-blue metal lockers, the coach is too focused to hear the muffled and sporadic brass-horn blasts and lazy drum rolls that announce an awakening pep band. He’s at the whiteboard, sitting on one of the plastic folding chairs with a black dry-erase marker, scribbling final instructions for his team, Bellarmine University, the Louisville school that won last season’s Division II national championship. His players and assistant coaches are on the glossy hardwood above, running through final warm-ups in front of a section of students who paint their faces Blue Devil-blue. Bellarmine’s team pastor, Father Dale Cieslik, is in the locker room, too. He paces, reviews the note cards that contain his pre-game prayer.

For the past three years, Duke University — four-time Division I champion Duke University — has invited the Division II winner to play an exhibition a couple of weeks before the games that count begin. In 2009, Mike Krzyzewski’s Blue Devils beat the University of Findlay, from Ohio’s Hancock County, by 36. Last season, against Cal Poly Pomona, the margin was 21.

On Oct. 28, the Friday before Bellarmine enters the Cameron Indoor Stadium locker room for the first time, Scotty Davenport, the Knights’ 55-year-old coach, is with his team in Louisville’s airport, indoor and sporadic checking that each guy has his Southwest Airlines boarding passes. “Only time we’ll fly all year,” Davenport says. Durham, N.C., by way of Tampa Bay, Fla., by way of Louisville. This is Division II travel.

Bellarmine will start 2011-'12 with a No. 1 ranking. I ask Davenport, in a public place or at work, “Is he a one-and-done freshman?” “Is he a one-and-done freshman?”

BECAUSE UK AND U OF L FANS LOVE TO HATE EACH OTHER

— Zach Everson

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12.11 LOUISVILLE MAGAZINE [41]
BECAUSE ONE KENTUCKY SCHOOL HAS A MASCOT THAT LOOKS LIKE THIS...

We know what you’re thinking: The hell is that thing? Let us explain. Western Kentucky University’s nickname is the Hilltoppers — the Bowling Green campus, well, it sits on a hill — but this red blob is the mascot, named Big Red. (Yeah, we don’t know how you’d depict an actual Hilltopper, either. Jack and Jill from the nursery rhyme, perhaps?) The backstory: In 1979, a WKU student designed Big Red, who wears white sneakers with red Nike swooshes in a photo on the university’s website and has starred in Capital One commercials. It’s our favorite mascot in the state for two reasons: 1. Everybody loves a blob, and 2. Big Red has a clam-like mouth and would swallow us whole if we said otherwise.

— KW

BECAUSE YOU’LL GO BALLISTIC WHEN YOU READ THIS...

(WHY BASKETBALL IS WORSE HERE)

11 > 2,000

Quick quiz: Would you rather have Kentucky’s 2,000-plus victories or UCLA’s 11 NCAA championships? If you picked the first option, you’re a liking UK fan. Look, if titles didn’t matter, you wouldn’t have run Tubby Smith (263-83 overall at UK) out of Lexington. Fact: College basketball’s winningest program is in California.

KENTUCKY HASN’T ANNEXED INDIANA

The state with the high school hoops tradition immortalized in ESPN’s top-ranked sports movie of all time (Hoosiers), the university that’s made back-to-back Cinderella Final Four appearances (Butler), and the pro basketball team that plays in a retro stadium regularly ranked as one of sports’ finest (the Indiana Pacers’ Conseco Fieldhouse) is as close to the commonwealth as the Wildcats were to winning the 1992 East Regional Final. Also, Indiana’s best homegrown mustachioed player (Larry Bird) went on to become an NBA legend, while Kentucky’s best player with a ‘stache (“Reechie” Farmer) was recently on the bottom half of one of our state’s worst-performing gubernatorial tickets.

NORTHEASTERN ELITISM IS JUSTIFIED

With 17 NBA championships, the Boston Celtics are one of the world’s premier pro sports franchises, as opposed to Kentucky’s NBA team . . . which is nonexistent. Basketball was invented in Massachusetts, now home to the sport’s Hall of Fame. When Rick Pitino, a man for whom Success Is a Choice, was unable to succeed with the Celtics, he came whimpering back to Kentucky, where success must be easier to achieve (or expectations are lower). And unlike Adolph Rupp’s Wildcats, the Celtics were at the forefront of the sport’s integration, having drafted the first black player in the NBA (Chuck Cooper in 1950).

TORONTO HAS THE RAPTORS. LOUISVILLE HAS J. BRUCE MILLER

Speaking of the pro ranks, non-hoops hotbeds like Oklahoma, Louisiana and Ontario (hint: it’s a Canadian province) have NBA teams. The closest thing Kentucky has is that attorney whose suitcase the Louisville Metro Council keeps stuffing with taxpayer funds — $89,000 as of last December — in an attempt to lure a team here. Can a state be considered the best in a sport if it only suits up amateurs?

MICHAEL JORDAN WAS A FINE DRAFT PICK

A state’s best-known draft pick should be famous for his prowess on the court — not for being the guy Portland selected instead of choosing Michael Jordan with the second pick in the 1984 NBA draft. But congrats to UK’s Sam Bowie, about whom both Sports Illustrated and ESPN agree: When it comes to draft busts, you’re number one.

U.S. NEWS RANKS UNIVERSITIES TOO

North Carolina’s Big Four — Duke, North Carolina State, the University of North Carolina and Wake Forest — have 11 NCAA championships among them. (Confession: I went to Wake, which I’m including even though it has never won one.) That’s more than the nine won by Kentucky’s hoops powerhouses. And while we’re doing advanced mathematics, four marquee programs is greater than two. The N.C. schools also trump the Kentucky ones in another ranking: three of them regularly appear in the top 30 of U.S. News & World Report’s list of best colleges. For 2012, UK ranks 124, U of L 164. Yes, it is possible to combine academic and athletic success, at least in North Carolina.

YOU

For allowing a new stadium to be built with taxpayer funds that’s lacking in the character its home city exudes. For the look of disbelief when someone answers “neither” when asked, “Who do you root for, UK or U of L?” For still thinking basketball is just better in Kentucky after reading this article.

— ZE

Disclosure: The author grew up in Massachusetts.

[Editor’s note: Another reason basketball is just bigger in Kentucky is because we allowed a blowhard from Massachusetts to contribute to this package.]