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“Our Chief Rival and Greatest Friend”: The WKU-Murray Athletic Rivalry

by Lynn Niedermeier

When the Murray State Normal School opened its doors in September 1923, the Western Kentucky State Normal School (now WKU) was already in its 17th year. Chartered in 1906 as one of two state-supported teacher training institutions, WKU served the Commonwealth alongside its contemporary, the Eastern Kentucky State Normal School (now Eastern Kentucky University). The two schools’ supply of teacher-graduates had failed to keep up with demand, however, and in 1922 the Kentucky General Assembly passed legislation to charter Murray and its eastern counterpart, Morehead.

In Murray, WKU quickly recognized a sister institution, but also spied a competitor—a two-sided relationship that, over the years, has enthusiastically played itself out on the athletic field. As of the close of the 2008-09 academic year, WKU’s Hilltoppers had a 36-24-7 edge in football wins against Murray’s Racers, beginning with a 7-0 victory on October 24, 1931. The women’s basketball teams first met on February 16, 1929 in a game won 27-20 by the Lady Toppers, who currently hold a 33-10 record. Men’s basketball competition opened on January 25, 1932 with a 26-24 loss for the Hilltoppers, who nevertheless hold the series advantage with 96 wins against 50 losses. In baseball games, Murray enjoys the winning edge at 64-60-1.

The numbers, of course, fail to tell the whole story. While WKU has a longer history with Eastern, its athletic clashes with Murray have aroused particularly intense emotions over the last eight decades. From graffiti attacks to “kidnapped” trophies, from a threat by a Murray student to “start a war in Bowling Green” to emergency meetings of administrators to resolve an “out-of-control” relationship, the WKU-Murray rivalry stands out as one of the most spirited and, at times, most combative in Kentucky intercollegiate sports.

The first football game in 1931 was a highly anticipated affair. Some 300 Murray students, allotted half-price 75-cent tickets, came by special train to Bowling Green. Waiting for them was a “wild and spasmodic mob” of WKU fans. Both schools’ bands performed at halftime, during which a blonde Murray co-ed presented WKU president Henry Hardin Cherry with a bouquet of chrysanthemums.¹ By 1935, deadlocked at two victories each, the schools had already earned a reputation as arch rivals, but in 1939 a clever scheduling change cemented the relationship. That year, the teams did not meet until the final game of their regular seasons, inaugurating a tradition that would last, with only four interruptions, for the next 46 years.²

Despite WKU’s series advantage of 5-2-1, the 1940 football contest found the squads evenly matched. This last game on the schedule, Bowling Green’s *Daily News* reminded its readers, was in truth the opening game because the entire season’s success depended upon its outcome. Five thousand fans were expected at the Murray stadium, including WKU president

¹ Athletic Committee Minutes, 20 October 1931, Western Kentucky University Archives; *College Heights Herald*, 2 November 1931.

² *Courier-Journal*, 30 October 1935. To date, WKU and Murray have faced each other in the final football game of their regular seasons from 1939-1942, 1946-1949, 1951-1985 and 1992-1993.

Paul Garrett, who had received the customary invitation from Murray president James H. Richmond. Although Garrett was initially reluctant to be seated alongside his counterpart in the stands—"Our natural sense of courtesy might hamper our exhibition of proper enthusiasm," he explained—the presidents jointly witnessed a game in which there was "glory enough for all." President Richmond was proud but gracious in defeat. Referring to the touchdown pass that gave WKU its 6-0 win, he wrote Garrett: "Your boys could not have scored on the ground in a week, the way that Murray line was playing, but they did score through the air, and 'that's that.'"³

In their correspondence, Presidents Garrett and Richmond were hospitable and sportsmanlike, inviting each other to games and congratulating the opposing team on its skill. Through the 1930s and 1940s, their schools' rivalry in basketball gave them a further topic for discussion, as WKU and Murray clashed regularly in Kentucky Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (KIAC) tournament play and in regional play through the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA). The two exchanged good wishes as their schools advanced in the 1941 SIAA tournament, until WKU and Murray found themselves facing each other in the championship game in Bowling Green. Declaring that "we are always happy when we can defeat our chief rival and greatest friend," President Richmond nevertheless applauded WKU after its 45-41 win, a gesture made easier by the fact that the previous week Murray had taken the KIAC crown from Western.⁴ In 1948, both schools joined the newly formed Ohio Valley Conference (OVC), where Murray won the first championship in football and WKU in men's basketball.

In the 1950s, the WKU-Murray football rivalry was red hot, and during the 1955-56 season it threatened to boil over. On Thursday, November 17, 1955, word spread that some Murray students had arrived in Bowling Green to make mischief in advance of that Saturday's homecoming game against WKU; they became the chief suspects in an attempt to ignite the pyre that had been prepared for the next night's pep rally and bonfire. In response, on Friday morning some WKU students traveled to Murray and absconded with a banner commemorating Murray's participation in the 1948 Tangerine Bowl. Not to be outdone, Murray students returned to Bowling Green on Friday night with pots of paint and a particularly inviting canvas in mind: the water tower that stood on the crest of the Hill overlooking the football stadium. Their attempt to scale the tower and inscribe their school's superiority on the tank was thwarted, however, when WKU defenders, brandishing an ROTC training rifle, forced them down and rewarded three of them with what the *Daily News* described as "the customary 'W' haircut"—the letter "W" shaved onto the tops of their heads. Their photograph appeared in the newspaper together with a picture of WKU students proudly holding the kidnapped Tangerine Bowl banner.⁵

The game itself ended with a 28-12 loss for WKU. After being unceremoniously dragged across the field at halftime, the Tangerine Bowl banner was returned to Murray, but a similar trophy soon disappeared from WKU's W Club room. Two days after the game, a group of WKU

³ *Park City Daily News*, 22 November 1940; Paul Garrett to James H. Richmond, 21 November 1940, Paul Garrett Papers, University Archives; *College Heights Herald*, 6 December 1940.

⁴ James H. Richmond to Paul Garrett, 6, 10 March 1941, Garrett Papers.

⁵ *Park City Daily News*, 20 November 1955. WKU's former football field, flanked by the "Gander" Terry Colonnade, is now occupied by the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center. The water tower was removed in 1971.

students endured the “haircut” treatment when they were discovered at Murray, possibly in an attempt to retrieve the W Club banner.⁶ Taking stock of these and other provocations, fans of both schools simmered with resentment.

Prior to its removal in 1971, the water tower overlooking WKU’s former football field (now occupied by the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center) was an inviting target for visiting Murray fans determined to paint a declaration of their school’s superiority. (University Archives)



In men’s basketball that year,⁷ storm clouds had already gathered because of the drama and controversy of the previous season. During 1954-55, WKU and Murray had met in four hard-fought contests that featured bone-jarring fouls, ejected players, punch-throwing fans, and even a fainting cheerleader. WKU had won the first three, only to be upset by Murray in the OVC tournament semi-final. The next year, after a game on January 7, 1956 in which WKU prevailed 88-77, Murray coach Rex Alexander publicly insinuated that the Hilltoppers enjoyed an unfair home court advantage because of “loose officiating” and accused the coaching staff of poor sportsmanship.⁸

It was the last straw. Incensed, WKU’s Athletic Committee convened in emergency session. Joining the regular committee members were President Kelly Thompson, head basketball coach E. A. Diddle and his assistant Ted Hornback, and head football coach Jack Clayton and his assistants Turner Elrod and Frank Griffin. WKU’s rivalry with Murray, President Thompson warned, was “getting out of bounds and becoming very serious.” At Thompson’s request, a subcommittee prepared a report on the matter. Instead of carrying on a feud through the press, it recommended face-to-face discussions with Murray administrators but declined to rule out a suspension of athletic relations between the schools.⁹

President Thompson forwarded the report to Murray president Ralph H. Woods, who readily agreed to confer on methods of improving relations. In their exchange, nevertheless, neither passed up the opportunity to catalogue the incidents of vandalism and graffiti that had occurred on their campuses. Woods even raised a slight from several years past, when the phrase “Murray O.V.C. Chumps” had been painted on a viaduct near WKU’s campus and not immediately removed. Thompson was heartened, however, by an editorial in the *Murray Ledger*

⁶ Ralph H. Woods to Kelly Thompson, 20 January 1956 (appended to Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956).

⁷ WKU had eliminated women’s intercollegiate basketball in 1930. Play did not resume until 1974 with the enactment of Title IX legislation.

⁸ *Paducah-Sun Democrat*, 10 January 1956.

⁹ Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956; L. T. Smith to Kelly Thompson, 13 January 1956 (appended to Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956).

& *Times* calling for the schools to make peace and urging Murray students to be good hosts when the Hilltoppers came to play basketball on February 11.¹⁰

Not all students, unfortunately, were listening. The morning after the game, the WKU community awoke to find Murray's winning 74-70 score scrawled on the sidewalk in front of Cherry Hall and the statue of Henry Hardin Cherry splashed with paint. The "wanton desecration" produced a wave of outrage at WKU, but also vows from Murray's administration to cooperate in tracking down the culprits. The Murray Student Council even expressed regrets and called for a "more mature attitude toward school rivalry."¹¹

At both schools, a majority recognized the benefits, in President Thompson's words, of keeping their relationship "keen and exuberant" while protecting it from the more anarchic elements of their student populations. At WKU, nevertheless, the water tower and Cherry's statue remained favorite targets for Murray shock troops. For a week preceding the November 21, 1959 football game, fans patrolled the water tower day and night to defend against a Murray student's threat to "start a war." The effort fell short when, shortly before halftime, an invader managed to scale the tower and inscribe his curse on WKU—to no avail, as Murray's 21-6 loss attested. Murray won the next year's game 26-7 on its home field, but President Woods extended his now routine apology to President Thompson, regretting that "some person or persons again painted Dr. Cherry's statue."¹²

As Murray and WKU fans jostled off the field, coaches and athletes nursed their own particular wounds over the years. "Each year, I'd panic and try to put in a bunch of trick plays" against Murray, recalled WKU football coach Nick Denes. "But it never worked and we'd end up doing the same old stuff." The victim of a 56-14 drubbing by WKU in 1969, Murray coach Bill Furgerson vowed to get even after the Hilltoppers "rubbed our noses into it" in the final minutes by delegating quarterback duties to their fullback. In his own playing days as Murray's quarterback, Furgerson and his teammates would practice by dyeing their pants and jerseys in WKU's signature color in order to be "seeing red" long before the big season-ending game.¹³

In the late 1970s, thanks to Murray athletic trainer Tom Simmons, another red-colored article became part of the schools' competitive tradition. For an older generation of fans, remembered Simmons, WKU had always been "THE game," but in recent years the rivalry had seemed to lose steam. He saw a chance to reinvigorate it in 1978 when he attended a professional meeting in Atlanta with Bill Edwards, his counterpart at WKU. Finding that he had forgotten to pack a belt, Simmons borrowed one from Edwards—a red one, which, in distinctive 1970s fashion, Edwards usually wore with a blue blazer and red plaid bell-bottomed trousers

¹⁰ Kelly Thompson to Ralph H. Woods, 14 January 1956; Ralph H. Woods to Kelly Thompson, 20 January 1956; Kelly Thompson to Elmus J. Beale, 31 January 1956 (appended to Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956).

¹¹ *Park City Daily News*, 13 February 1956; William G. Nash to L. T. Smith, 22 February 1956; Student Council, Murray State College to Kelly Thompson, 22 February 1956 (appended to Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956).

¹² Kelly Thompson to Murray Student Council, 3 March 1956 (appended to Athletic Committee Minutes, 12 January 1956); *Courier-Journal*, 19 November 1974; Ralph H. Woods to Kelly Thompson, 15 November 1960, Kelly Thompson Papers, University Archives.

¹³ Furgerson and Denes are quoted in Tom Patterson, "Western-Murray battle a 'war' of its own," *Courier-Journal*, 19 November 1974.

when representing WKU on the road. Later, when Edwards asked for the belt's return, Simmons agreed, provided that WKU's football team defeated Murray that season. To make the "travelling trophy" official, Simmons had the belt mounted on a plaque with brass plates to record the WKU-Murray scores. Since then, the red belt has resided with the victor in the most recent contest, while the losers must be content with an empty "reserved" space on the wall of their training room.¹⁴

Since WKU's move from the OVC to the Sun Belt Conference in 1982, scheduling games has become more difficult and consequently fewer opportunities exist for the Hilltoppers and Racers to challenge each other. In 2008, nevertheless, the rivalry still had life: the schools' basketball programs completed the second year of a four-year commitment and, after last meeting Murray in the NCAA Division I-AA playoffs in 2002, the Hilltopper football team retained custody of the red belt with a 50-9 win over the Racers. As the years pass, their record against other rivals may grow, but with so much colorful history at stake, alumni and fans of both WKU and Murray can count themselves winners whenever a day is reserved for "THE game."

¹⁴ *Murray Ledger & Times*, 25 September 1985; *Park City Daily News*, 27 September 2000. On the red belt tradition, see also *College Heights Herald*, 10 September 1998, 18 September 2008.