

Out & About Kentucky Style: Blanton Collier

By Gary P. West
Contributing Writer

Who would have thought when the Cleveland Browns won the NFL title back in 1964 that it would be another 52 years before the city would claim another major professional sports championship?

Though it might have seemed like a hundred years to some, it took the Cavaliers to rid Cleveland, sometimes called the "mistake on the lake," of the jinx.

When the Browns won, Lyndon Johnson was in the White House, and the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame hadn't even been thought of, at least not in Cleveland. In fact, many of its inductees were years away from their first performance.

Lost in it all, almost relegated to a footnote, is a Kentucky connection.

Before the Cavaliers' win, the Browns were prominent in that they had been Cleveland's last championship team. Often referred to as "the Jim Brown-led" team, little, if any, has been said of the man who really orchestrated the '64 victory: Blanton Collier.

Collier was the head coach of the Browns, and he was a Kentucky guy through and through. Its history runs so deep that it is important to tell the rest of the story.

Before the Browns, Collier is probably best remembered for coaching the Kentucky Wildcats

football team for eight years until he was abruptly fired at the end of the 1961 season, with three years remaining on his \$17,500 annual contract.

It is mind-boggling to think that Collier is the last UK football coach to depart the school with a winning record. His 41-36-3 mark has not been matched by the multitude of coaches who have followed. Charlie Bradshaw, John Ray, Fran Curci, Jerry Claiborne, Bill Curry, Hal Mumme, Guy Morris, Rich Brooks and Joker Phillips coached there and none had winning records when they left Lexington. So if you think it was a long dry spell in Cleveland, look no further than the 55 years for Kentucky football since Collier left.

Hindsight is easy. But looking back on it makes one wonder what UK was thinking when they fired Collier. In spite of a 5-2-1 record against hated rival Tennessee, he and his staff were often criticized for poor recruiting and lack of enthusiasm. Outside pressure from fans and donors was too much for Collier to overcome.

And now another part of the rest of the story.

Collier had been saddled with several self-imposed recruiting restrictions carried over from the Paul "Bear" Bryant era in the years before.

Bryant, in order to head off any possible future NCAA investigations that had seeped over from the



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Pictured left to right: Ed Rutledge, Howard Schnellenberger, Ermal Allen, Blanton Collier, Don Shula, John North, Bob Cummings and Bill Arnsparger.

UK basketball scandal, agreed to implement a policy that he would sign no more than five out-of-state players annually.

It gets even crazier. An added stipulation was that the five had to seek out UK and then apply for scholarships.

Bryant's teams had been rich with kids from Pennsylvania and Ohio. But as they graduated, the coach realized that he was now operating at a disadvantage, one he

had brought on himself. Leading his Kentucky to bowl games on a regular basis, he now saw a dim future for the Wildcats.

Bryant then said hello to Texas A&M and Collier said hello to Lexington.

Collier, now with all of Bryant's baggage that included no out-of-state recruiting contacts, increased academic requirements and a UK administration opposed to "red-shirting," (a practice that allowed

holding athletes out of participation for a year without affecting their eligibility) faced an uphill struggle in the SEC. All of this was happening in a state with just a few more than a hundred high schools playing eleven man football. By comparison, Tennessee had over 300.

Although Kentucky went to no bowl games under Collier, compared to Bryant's record he was written off as underachieving. Still,

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The Shedding of the Corset for the Blue & Gray: Part 1

By William Robinson
Contributing Writer

In the spring of 1864, Private Lyons Wakeman fell ill and was sent to a hospital in the rear of the fighting at New Orleans, Louisiana. About six weeks later, the soldier died. There was nothing unusual about the soldier's death. After all, for every soldier killed in battle during the Civil War, two died from disease, shock after being wounded, or lack of proper medical care. But Pvt. Wakeman was different from the other dead soldiers. He was a woman.

According to some historical records, there may have been at least 400 women who disguised themselves as men and fought in the Civil War on both the Union and the Confederate sides. However no one is sure of these numbers. These are only the numbers of the women that their disguises were found out.

Some joined and disguised themselves as men because they did not want to be parted from their husbands. Some wanted to serve their country. Others were just looking for adventure, as there were many things that the laws of the United States did not allow women to do in the 1800s:

- They could not vote;
- They could not own property;
- They could not serve on a jury;
- They could not be elected to a political office;
- They could not serve in the military.

Since women were not allowed to become soldiers, they had to pretend to be men. They had to bind their busts tight in order to wear men's uniforms, cut their hair short and come up with a good man's name, as was the case of Loretta Laffite, who had been interested in adventures since a child. She read novels about pirates and pictured herself as having a black beard or a fierce mustache and wearing gold earrings and a turban or large hat, carrying a sword or dagger in her hand and brass pistols in her belt, with a man's name like Uruj Barbarossa or Sir Henry Morgan.

Later in her life, she read about the Revolutionary War and the famous women of those times such as Molly Pitcher, who was a heroine of the battle of Monmouth. After her husband fell from a heat stroke while firing his cannon, she promptly took his place and fought the rest of the battle and victory.

Laffite often heard her mother say to her father: "That girl is going to be the death of me yet if you don't stop having those men tutors come to the house. They are teaching her Latin, French, science and mathematics. She does not want to learn anything about sewing, cooking or the running of a house."

At the age of 17 and at the beginning of the Civil War, Loretta fell madly in love with a dashing young lieutenant in the Confederate Army named George McKolley. Over the objections of her parents, she ran off and lied about her age to marry him.

When he received orders for his unit to go to the front to fight the Union, she begged to enlist in the Confederate Army in order to be with him. He was appalled at her request and told her to go home and wait for him. She did not tell him she could not go home, due to her parents not forgiving her for running off and getting married to him.

Soon after his departure, she took the name of William Dampier. Cutting her hair very close, putting on a man's wig, false mustache and tucking her under clothes under her uniform and into her boots, she managed to transform herself into a very presentable man.

Loretta spent the first part of her Confederate career as Lt. William Dampier, raising and equipping an independent company using her own funds. Even though her mother was angry, her father managed to send her some money from time to time. Like many units recruited at the beginning of the war, her term of enlistment was only three months. But in those three months she learned to smoke cigars, chew tobacco, drink and talk like the other soldiers. She wrote, that in daily army life, undressing was not usually a problem, as the troops were always on the move:

"We would go for weeks without changing our uniforms. We only had time to wash our faces and hands and all of us would go into the woods when nature called. Here is where I learned to talk and act like a man, but always in the back of my mind, 'What if I get wounded or captured by the Union?'"

Learning of the death of her husband and with the term of the enlistment up, she turned command of her independent company over to a trusted associate and headed for another adventure.

This time in Mississippi, Laffite could not find a way to go into the Confederate Army as a self appoint-

ed lieutenant, so she enlisted as a private, again as Pvt. William Dampier and within days she was in a major battle which lasted three days with Union prisoners being taken and the dead on both sides being buried.

While Laffite was going over the battlefield after the battle, she heard a terrible cry of pain coming from the Union side. Heading for the voice, she thought to herself "That sounds like a woman's voice."

Reaching the wounded soldier and finding him in serious condition with a chest wound. "What is your name soldier?" "Frank Martin." "Frank do you have something to tell me?" "Yes. My name is Ello Parks and I am a woman" was the last word she said before she died.

After the burial of all dead soldiers, Laffite return to the company and heard her sergeant telling another soldier: "What are those Union soldiers' boys doing anyway! I just heard there was three women in Union uniforms that were captured in this last battle. I sure am glad we don't have to worry about woman in our uniforms." Laffite wrote later, that she was in the process of getting out of the company before they found her out. When they asked for volunteers to ride as dispatch riders, she jumped at the chance and left as soon as they gave her a horse and instructions.

While riding as a dispatch rider, a horse fell on her. She thought she had broken her right foot. She knew for sure if a Confederate doctor examined her, there would be lots of questions. All of this was going through her mind as she lay along the road where the horse fell. What to do!

(Editor's Note: Part 2 of The Shedding of the Corset for the Blue and Gray will appear in the August 4 edition of Mercer's Magazine.)

(Editor's Note: William Robinson is a graduate of Campbell University and has a master's degree in education from the University of Arizona. He has taught at the high school and college level. He is retired from the U.S. Postal Service. He and his wife, Wilma, have three children, Christina, Rita and Rebecca.)



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