



★ THE ★  
**CLASSIC**

HOW EVERETT CASE AND HIS TOURNAMENT  
BROUGHT BIG-TIME BASKETBALL TO THE SOUTH

BETHANY BRADSHER

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*The Classic: How Everett Case and His Tournament Brought  
Big-Time Basketball to the South*

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*A tournament is like a banquet,  
and every game is a feast.*

Everett Case

# *Introduction*

It was late, close to midnight, one December night in 1956. A thirteen-year-old boy named Tim Nicholls had feasted all day at the hulking arena called the William Neal Reynolds Coliseum—feasted on hot dogs, on barbecue served up in the Reynolds basement, and most of all on basketball.

Nicholls was worn out, but it was the good kind of tired that comes from overdosing on something you love. As a Christmas present, he had received a coveted book of tickets for the Dixie Basketball Classic, so he had spent his day in Raleigh on the North Carolina State University campus watching four games featuring his favorite team, North Carolina, the host team, N. C. State, local favorites Duke and Wake Forest, and visiting squads Iowa, West Virginia, Utah, and DePaul.

Nicholls had one of the best seats in the house for much of the action—he had befriended the woman who played the coliseum organ, and she let him sit on the bench when she wasn't entertaining the crowd during time-outs or between periods. The teams from the North Carolina colleges, known as the Big Four, had dominated that day in the Classic's opening round. They all easily dispatched their out-of-state opponents, and the next afternoon Tim would come back to see his Tar Heels take on Duke. But before he could return to the Coliseum, he needed to get some rest.

As most of the fans streamed away from Reynolds toward the parking lot or their homes nearby, Tim walked deeper into the darkness toward Alexander Hall, a men's dormitory in the

center of campus. In his pocket he had a key to the outside door, and when he reached the building he opened the door quietly.

He snuck into the lobby on light feet and navigated the dark stairwell to a room on the third floor belonging to a friend from his hometown of Canton, North Carolina. When classes were in session, the place was loud and bustling with activity, but the Dixie Classic was held between Christmas and New Year's, when the campus was shuttered for the holiday break.

For three years Nicholls stayed in Alexander Hall during the three-day staging of the annual Dixie Classic. In that time, he never turned on a single light. He crawled into bed each night, woke up and showered using the natural light of the dawn, and walked over to Reynolds for another dose of basketball. He never saw another person in the building.

"I was not supposed to be there," said Nicholls, who in adulthood became a successful Raleigh attorney. "It was understood that if I got caught this guy might get kicked out of school. So I would go in, I would unlock the door and take my shoes off, and I would go up the steps, and the whole time I was in the dorm I never turned on a light. In the morning I would get up and go over to Reynolds."

Nicholls stayed in the gloomy dorm room twice by himself and once with a friend from his hometown. While he watched basketball, his mother would visit relatives in the nearby town of Wendell, and each year, the morning after the Dixie Classic final, she would pick him up in front of Alexander Hall and they would drive back home to Canton, in western North Carolina.

There were times, walking alone on the dark campus or washing up in a shower that felt like a cave, when Nicholls was a bit afraid. But when he checked his program for the day's Dixie Classic offerings, he knew that loneliness was a small price to pay for daily access to the greatest holiday basketball tournament ever staged.

The Dixie Classic was created in 1949 by Everett Case, the head coach at North Carolina State and a basketball innovator of the highest order. Case instituted a host of new traditions and schemes for State's team, known as the Wolfpack, and his vision for hoops supremacy in the region is widely credited with moving college basketball from the background of the North Carolina sports scene to the place of honor it has occupied for decades.

Case dreamed big and expected greatness, and the flashiest symbol of that dream was the Dixie Classic, a three-day, eight-team spectacle that fast became the hottest ticket in sports if you lived in North Carolina and you followed teams called Wolfpack, Tar Heels, Blue Devils, or Demon Deacons. He had plenty of help from able administrators and skilled athletes, but from 1949 to 1960 Case boldly crafted an event so exceptional that its 1961 cancellation was still eliciting grief from fans fifty years later.

Before Everett Case came to Raleigh and the Dixie Classic became the stocking stuffer that every young fan dreamed of on Christmas Eve, basketball backboards in North Carolina driveways were scarce. World War II was still vivid, and the sport that had captivated the region in the prewar days was football. Case, reared in the refined hoops culture of Indiana, was the catalyst that upended that arrangement and made basketball king. His name has been forgotten by most of today's Big Four adherents, but his legacy is felt on all four campuses, where basketball dominance isn't just a wish, it's an expectation.

Consider the accomplishments of the North Carolina, N. C. State, Duke, and Wake Forest squads since the Dixie Classic was suddenly and unceremoniously shut down amidst scandal in 1961. In the decades since the tournament ended, Big Four teams have won the national title more than twenty percent of the time. At least one team from the Big Four made the NCAA Final Four thirty-two times in that half century, or sixty-four

percent of the time. And the Big Four has produced ninety All-Americans in those years.

Those numbers are helpful in explaining modern-day phenomena like Krzyzewskiville, a tent city named after Coach Mike Krzyzewski which springs up each winter on the campus of Duke University so that students can camp out for prime basketball tickets. Some residents of “Kville,” which is governed by student monitors and equipped with wireless internet service, stay in their tents for more than two months. Another fingerprint of Case’s legacy is the Carolina Basketball Museum in Chapel Hill, an 8,000 square-foot monument to Tar Heel excellence that is the sole basketball-only museum on a university campus in the country.

In Raleigh, the very epicenter of Case’s glory days, the teams fell on hard times after the last national championship in 1983, but a series of four different head coaches in twenty years demonstrates the school’s determination to bring the shine back to the program that Case built. Modern Wolfpack fans share that yearning, as evidenced by a Facebook group created in 2008 called “Bring Back the Dixie Classic Basketball Tournament.”

From a thirteen-year-old fan staying all by himself in a deserted dormitory to a community of fans willing to sleep in tents for weeks to procure a basketball ticket, extreme faithfulness to basketball in the state of North Carolina follows a clear road back to the Dixie Classic. It was a tournament that gave preeminence to the game and its fans, and its success has led to countless moments of glory on the hardwood, flashes of basketball sublimity burned in the memories of fans—fans who never knew that they owed a debt to a holiday tournament dreamed up by a coach and a sportswriter looking to fill a grand new arena and change the culture of an entire state.

**We hope you enjoyed this small taste of**  
*The Classic: How Everett Case and His Tournament*  
*Brought Big-Time Basketball to the South*  
**by Bethany Bradsher**

*The Classic* will be released on November 11, 2011,  
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Thanks for your interest!

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