

National Award Winner: Hills of Coal, Feats of Clay

The following article was named the Best Sports Feature Story written in America in 1988 and was the lead article in the 1989 edition of Best Sport Stories, an anthology of newspaper and magazine stories judged the best written in America in 1988. (The judge's comments are at the end of the article.)

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By Sam Heys

MANCHESTER, Ky. - The Farmer brothers learned their basketball on the side of a mountain. On a dusty, rocky patch of earth sprinkled with small black chunks of coal. Their shots were shadowed by an ugly, barren 40-foot-high cliff, left behind decades ago by a coal company that did a little strip mining and moved on.

Such "high walls" dot the landscape of eastern Kentucky, creating beneath them bits of flatland rarely big enough for a factory, but always big enough for basketball.

Richie and Russ Farmer played their basketball whenever they could: early summer mornings, days the wind gusted relentlessly through the mountains, by the light of the moon. They now play it for the vindication of Clay County.

For a county long on illiteracy and hard times and short on quality of life and high school graduates, the Farmer brothers and three other mountain boys are dishing out a little poetic justice. "Everybody thinks people from the mountains are dumb hicks, that we can't do anything," said Richie Farmer in thick mountain English. "But we can play basketball."

Indeed. Only one of its five starters is at least 6 feet tall -- and he's only 6-foot-1 -- yet Clay County High School is ranked among the top 10 high school teams in America. For two years, it has been the best team in Kentucky, one of America's foremost hoops states, and their leader, Richie Farmer, is a lock to become Mr. Basketball in Kentucky at season's end.

But what the Farmers and their friends have done transcends county lines. They have uplifted an entire region: the mountains of eastern Kentucky, a pocket of isolation with little to cheer about. Even its basketball, long the pride of the mountains, had hit hard times.

When Clay County won the state championship last year, it became the first mountain team to do so in 31 years. It did it by winning the Sweet Sixteen state tournament, which annually throws both large and small schools -- Clay County has a senior class of 220 -- into a battle royal for the kingdom of Kentucky basketball.

Clay County coach Bobby Keith, an old mountain boy himself, put it in perspective at that time: "Sometimes people in the mountains have it a little bit harder than other people, and sometimes it's kind of hard to find enough things to be proud of. But this should take care of that for a while."

The Tigers are expected to give the mountains a second dose of pride this month by becoming the first team in 17 years to win back-to-back Sweet Sixteen titles. They had won 38 straight games against Kentucky teams going into the district tournament, and if they win this week's Region 13 tournament, they will enter the state tournament at Louisville on March 16 as the team

to beat. They have been ranked No. 1 in Kentucky since November and are essentially the same team that won the state last year.

They are more than a team from the mountains, however; they are a mountain team. "When you talk about being a mountain team, people think of a team that tries to out hustle the other team," said Richie Farmer, "although they might be as talented."

"We want to win it for all the 5-10 and 5-11 guys that their high school coaches said were too small to play," said Keith after winning the state championship last year. "We want to prove them wrong."

The four players who have been the core of both this year's and last year's teams -- the Farmers, Kevin Jackson and Russell Chadwell -- are all 5-foot-11.

"Last year, the other teams looked at us and just laughed," said Chadwell, an 18-year-old senior who precedes each home game by throwing down a variety of slam dunks in pregame warm-ups.

Richie Farmer, 18, is Clay County's leader. He averages 27 points per game -- his brother, a junior, averages 17 -- and played in his first Sweet Sixteen as an eighth grader. He has a 3.8 grade-point average and is a mature, nearly flawless floor leader.

Unlike Richie Farmer, who is being courted by countless colleges, Jackson, 18, has been promised a miner's job by a Clay County coal company when he graduates this spring. One of 10 children, Jackson has handled the family farm since his father was disabled. He married a high school sophomore last summer and now tends his own farm also.

Stanley Abner, a 54-year-old coal miner's son who teaches algebra and tends the scorebook and public address system at Clay County games, understands clearly what the Farmers, Jackson, Chadwell and 6-foot-1 junior Eugene Rawlings -- the other starter on the 14-player roster -- are accomplishing. "This just shows us what we can accomplish if we take the talent God gave us and use it," he said. "These guys are nothing but a bunch of overachievers. And Bobby Keith is the epitome of the work ethic."

Keith's favorite restaurant, Bob and Skyler's Steak House, opens at 4:30 every morning. "We miss a lot of business because we don't open any earlier," said owner Skyler Garrison. "Then they say we're sorry and won't work." The work ethic? When Wal-Mart opened in the county seat of Manchester 4½ years ago with 76 jobs, there were more than 800 applications the first day.

Clay County's unemployment rate is listed at 14 percent but most county officials put it between 30 and 35 percent. "That's about 20 percent who've never worked and there's no record on," said County Judge Executive Carl "Crawdad" Sizemore, one of a myriad of Sizemores whose political fiefdom is Clay County.

The walls of Sizemore's office on Courthouse Hill, above downtown Manchester, are decked with pictures of previous Clay County basketball teams. He talks quickly about the Sunday last March when the Tigers paraded home with the state championship. Cars lined both sides of the Daniel Boone Parkway for the 12 miles from the county line into Manchester. "I was amazed at how they lined up out of those creeks and hollows, people who may have never come to a game," he said.

Charles Marcum, who lives in the hollow below the Farmers, has missed only two of the 25 games Clay County has played in Kentucky this season. He has followed the Tigers around the state despite having to rise each morning at 3:30 for the 1½-hour trip to his job in a Harlan County coal mine. Because there is little coal mining in Clay County now, Marcum accepts his daily three-hour round trip over winding roads -- as well as the three months he was out of work

last year -- stoically. Seeing his alma mater vanquish all obstacles on the basketball court makes his own hurdles easier to bear. "To me, this is the best thing ever to happen to Clay County, other than coal," said Marcum, 28.

Clay County is a slave to coal. The doorway to the high school gym is the escape hatch for a people who relish seeing the world shrunk to a hardwood rectangle less than 90 feet long and 50 feet wide. There, no one beats Clay County.

Off the court, Clay County has taken a beating of late:

Just two years ago, Clay County was ranked 119th out of 120 Kentucky counties in quality of life. The ratings, compiled by an Eastern Kentucky University professor, were computed from education levels, average income, crime rate and farmland value.

The county's biggest factory, Mid-South Electrics Inc., with more than 300 employees, was destroyed by fire 2½ years ago. Its owners are rebuilding it in neighboring Jackson County, the only county Clay topped in "quality of life."

The Hardly Able Coal Co. has been dragged through the courts and national news media throughout the 1980s. The Manchester-based strip-mining operation -- which pumped \$600,000 per month into the local economy annually and had 125 employees -- is bankrupt because of the more than \$500,000 it has received in federal fines for mining violations.

The county has received statewide publicity as a marijuana-growing hotbed. County officials readily admit marijuana is Clay County's No. 1 cash crop.

A legacy of violence has shrouded the county since its leading families got into a nine-year, murderous shooting feud at the turn of the century. Family lines still run deep in Clay County. Keith believes 99 percent of the people living in the county were born there. In 18 years as coach, he has had only two players who were not sons of natives. And they were brothers.

Four of Keith's first six players are the sons of former Clay County High School players. They grew up playing basketball with their fathers, coming to Clay County games and dreaming of being a Tiger. "They want to be better than their daddies," said Keith, 47.

When Keith went to a county elementary school last spring to show off the 5½-foot-high state championship trophy, a first grader approached him. "He said, 'When I get as big as that trophy, I'm going to play for you,'" Keith said.

Clay County's nine elementary schools -- with names such as Horse Creek, Goose Rock and Burning Springs -- run through the eighth grade and usually draw a couple of hundred fans to their basketball games. The countywide tournament fills the 2,500-seat high school gymnasium.

"They get to relating to these kids, and they get attached to them," said Skyler Garrison, who coached the Tigers in the 1960s and is one of the co-owners of the embattled Hardly Able Coal Co. His restaurant is the site of a daily, impromptu round-table basketball discussion. Old men sip coffee and compare Richie Farmer to the best guard ever to emerge from the mountains: Jerry West of West Virginia.

It was 60 years ago this season that basketball became a lifeline to the mountains of Kentucky, as the rest of the state and then America learned of the Carr Creek community of Knott County. About 200 people lived there, and 15 of them went to the high school that was perched on the side of a mountain. The basketball team had neither uniforms nor a gym. It practiced outside and traveled to its games by a mule-drawn log wagon or by foot.

In the finals of the 1928 state tournament, Carr Creek battled Ashland through four overtimes, finally losing 13-11. The Creekers went on to a national tournament in Chicago, where they became the darlings of the fans. They won two games and headed home. The mountains stood a little taller upon their return. Eastern Kentucky finally had a court upon which it could compete

with the outside world. Mountain schools were poor and tiny, but basketball required little money, not much land and few players. By the 1940s, mountain schools were dominating Kentucky basketball.

Keith was born in 1940. "I was one of those little boys who dribbled a ball down a dirt road and dreamed of being a Tiger," he said.

He grew up to be a Tiger. At 6-foot-3, he was a fiercely competitive basketball player. He went on to play at junior college, where he was valedictorian, and then moved on to Union College in Barbourville, Ky., where he again was valedictorian.

Keith's six brothers and sisters all left the mountains to find adequate work. "So many of our good people have had to leave," he said. "These are the best people in the world. They want to stay, but there are no jobs for them and no chance for them to succeed."

Keith did what he always dreamed of doing. He went back to Manchester to coach basketball. In 1970, after eight years as an assistant coach, he was given a chance to prove his theory that "when these people are given an opportunity, they usually excel."

They have proved him right, winning more than 500 games for him, going to the Sweet Sixteen 11 times and giving Clay County the best winning percentage in Kentucky -- 85 percent -- during his 18 seasons as coach.

Behind Keith's occasional backwoods expressions -- he said he was glad to win the state title because "these things are harder to come by than chicken teeth" -- is a shrewd coaching mind. He knows his opponents like a book and can work referees like a pump. His commitment to his players is unflagging; he has gotten scholarships, usually to small Kentucky schools, for all but three of the seniors who have played for him the last 17 years.

Keith underwent quadruple bypass surgery in August and has since lost 50 pounds, but his sideline intensity has not diminished. He teaches four consumer math classes a day -- students call him "Bobby" -- and owns Manchester's most popular men's clothing store. He admits to similarities between his Tigers and the small-town high school that won the 1954 Indiana state basketball championship and was immortalized in the 1986 movie "Hoosiers."

"We were both from rural areas, we were both small physically and we both beat big teams from a metro area," he said.

After winning state titles in 1954, '55 and '56, teams from Kentucky's three mountain regions went 29 years before making it to the state finals again in 1985, when Clay County lost to Hopkinsville 65-64. During the quarter-century before Clay County won the '87 state title, mountain teams were eliminated in the first round of the tournament 70 percent of the time.

The mountains' state title drought started in 1957, the year high school athletic competition was integrated in Kentucky. Predominantly black teams from Louisville dominated the Sweet Sixteen during the 1960s and 1970s, with Louisville teams winning eight state titles during one 10-year period.

Fittingly, Clay County had to beat a Louisville team to win the Sweet Sixteen last year at Rupp Arena in Lexington. The Tigers defeated Ballard High School 76-73 in overtime despite being soundly out-rebounded. Ballard's starters included two 6-foot-6 players, one 6-foot-5 and another 6-foot-3. "I'd rather play the big ones than the little ones," said Chadwell, he of the extraordinary leaping ability. "It just seems like you accomplish more."

The Tigers had won by 20 in the Sweet Sixteen semifinals against a Madison Central team with a lineup of players 6-8, 6-5, 6-4 and 6-5. In the quarterfinals, Clay County played before 24,041 people, the largest crowd ever to watch a high school game in the United States.

The Tigers were 35-3 last year and finished the regular season this year at 27-1. Their lone loss was in a December holiday tournament to Eau Claire High School of Columbia, S.C., the top-ranked team in South Carolina. Eau Claire started two 6-foot-9 players and another who was 6-foot-7, but the team still only beat Clay County 79-77.

In one incredible, 24-hour period in January -- the Louisville Invitational Tournament -- the Tigers defeated the No. 2, 3 and 5 teams in Kentucky. "There's a great deal of pride in the mountains and there's not many things we can say we rank at the top of Kentucky in," said Keith. "But we do in basketball."

Judge's Comments

The best journalism always has been that which helps us understand the human condition. The best sports writers have always known that. From Damon Runyon to Red Smith to Thomas Boswell, the finest writers of each generation have gone beyond recounting games and anointing heroes to explore the themes of life that often seemed distilled in the heat of athletic competition.

The best sports writing, like the best of all journalism, probes beneath the surface of the moment to lay bare the causes of defeat, the costs of victory, the connections between people and between events.

This year's winner in the feature story category, "Hills of Coal, Feats of Clay" by Sam Heys, is the tale of a remarkable basketball team and much more. The Clay County Tigers are a championship team, certainly, but they are more importantly a source of pride for a region without much to be proud of. They are heroes, certainly, but they are more importantly symbols of hope and of victory against long odds.

Heys understands the role the Tigers play in their coal-country culture. He helps us understand it, too. And he makes us care about both the team and culture.

After introducing the brothers who are the heart of the team, Richie and Russ Farmer, Heys tells us why this is a story worth reading.

For a county long on illiteracy and hard times and short on quality of life and high school graduates, the Farmer brothers and three other mountain boys are dishing out a little poetic justice. "Everybody thinks people from the mountains are dumb hicks, that we can't do anything," said Richie Farmer in thick mountain English. "But we can play basketball."

That's a paragraph to make Red Smith proud.

There are other images equally telling. Heys introduces us, for example, to a typical fan, miner Charles Marcum. "To me this is the best thing ever to happen to Clay County, other than coal," says Marcum. We learn that Clay County ranks 119th of 120 Kentucky counties in quality of life; that its leading employer, the aptly named Hardly Able Coal Co., is bankrupt; that its most important cash crop is marijuana.

And from Tigers coach Bobby Keith, "an old mountain boy himself," we learn what this story and this team are really all about. "There's a great deal of pride in the mountains, and there's not many things we can say we rank at the top of Kentucky in," says Keith. "But we do in basketball."