

## The Jackson Purchase: People and Places

### Kenny Rollins (1923-2012)

Kenny Rollins was a professional basketball player and a member of the University of Kentucky Wildcats basketball team. As point guard and captain of the Wildcats, he helped the team win the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship and Olympic championship in 1948. He later played for the Chicago Spurs of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Boston Celtics in the NBA, and the Louisville Alumnites of the National Professional Basketball League (NPBL). He is remembered in Kentucky history as an integral member of the “Fabulous Five” that brought the team to national attention in 1948.

Kenneth Herman Rollins was born on September 14, 1923, in Charleston, Missouri. In 1932, the family moved to Wickliffe, Kentucky, where Kenneth played basketball at Wickliffe High School. He graduated in 1941 and attended the University of Kentucky, where he played baseball and basketball. His baseball abilities brought interest from major league clubs, but he became known more for his basketball skills after he made



*Kenny Rollins (26) playing for the Wildcats against the Baylor Bears in 1948*

the team in his freshman year. He was coached by Adolph Rupp, a future Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame member. His studies were interrupted by World War II in 1943, when Rollins joined the United States Navy. During his time in the service, he continued playing basketball and was coached by another future Hall of Famer, Tony Hinkle.

Upon his return to the University of Kentucky in 1946, he was made captain of the basketball team. His 310 points in 37 games helped

secure him the team’s Most Valuable Player selection. He was recognized as one of the top players in the Southeastern Conference with his first of two All-SEC selections. The following year, he captained the Wildcats to a 39-3 record. He was selected to the All-SEC team again, and he served as a leader and mentor to fellow students throughout the season and into the playoffs. He was noted for his defensive performance in the playoffs, especially

against future NBA star Bob Cousy in the matchup between the Wildcats and the Holy Cross Crusaders.

The 1947-48 starting lineup, who came to be known as the “Fabulous Five,” led the team to the first national championship in University of Kentucky basketball history. They defeated the Baylor Bears in the championship game by a score of 77-59. Following the season, the team competed against other universities for the opportunity to represent the United States at the 1948 Summer Olympics. The team qualified for the games, and they went undefeated in London to win the gold medal. They remain the only team to have won both the National Collegiate Athletic Association championship and an Olympic gold in the same year.

In May 1948, Rollins was drafted by the Fort Wayne Pistons of the BAA. Prior to the 1948-49 season, he was traded to the Chicago Stags. He made his professional debut on November 6 and played two seasons with the Stags. For the 1949-50 season, the BAA merged with the National Basketball League to form the NBA. Over Rollins’s two seasons with the team, he recorded 719 points. The following season, he played for the Louisville Alumnites of the NPBL, but he did not get to finish the season, as the team folded mid-year.

Rollins returned to the NBA for one final season, signing as a free agent with the Boston Celtics for the 1952-53 season. He recorded 98 points in his final season. Following his retirement from basketball, he worked as a salesman. This role took him to Grand Rapids, Michigan, as well as several locations throughout Kentucky. In 1986, he retired from his position at the Smurfit Corporation in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky.

Rollins and his wife Mabel had two children: Kevin and Corinne. Kenny and Mabel moved to Florida in 1994, and Kenny later relocated to Indiana to live with his son after Mabel died. Kenny Rollins died on October 9, 2012, in Greencastle, Indiana.

Rollins and his Fabulous Five teammates were honored by the University of Kentucky in 1949 when their jerseys were retired. The other four members of the starting lineup had remained with the Wildcats and won a second national championship after Rollins had moved on to the BAA. Rollins was inducted into the Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame in 1995 and the Kentucky High School Hall of Fame in 2006. He is remembered as a top player for the team that won the first of the University of Kentucky’s eight NCAA championships during his journey from Wickliffe to the NBA.

### **Further Reading**

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