Nothing Finer

North Carolina's Sports History and the People Who Made It

Edited by

Wilt Browning

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Foreword

By John D. Swofford

A native of North Wilkesboro, John Swofford is the fourth and longest-serving commissioner in Atlantic Coast Conference history and in the process has become one of the most powerful voices in college athletics. A Morehead Scholar, he was the starting quarterback and defensive back at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and served the Tar Heels as athletic director for eighteen years before taking charge and reshaping the conference. John and his wife Nora live in Greensboro and are the parents of three daughters.

The state of North Carolina boasts a proud sports history, one of incomparable athletes and colorful characters, of rich tradition, impeccable leaders and intense competition. It is a story that has long begged to be relayed in its entirety.

That story is finally told in intriguing detail through *Nothing Finer: North Carolina's Sports History and the People Who Made It.* This book is truly a labor of love by nine award-winning journalists whose reporting and commentary have enlightened readers for more than four decades.

As I grew up in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, sports became a focal part of my life as a participant and a fan. Many fellow North Carolinians—both natives and those from elsewhere who now call our state their home—have been touched in a similar fashion.

As a football, basketball and track athlete at Wilkes Central High School, I shared in the passion for prep sports that resonates throughout the state. I retained a similar passion as I continued on as a student-athlete at the University of North Carolina, and later in my professional career as the Director of Athletics at the University of North Carolina and in my current position as the Commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

As such, I have been fortunate to observe and to experience first-hand much of the history chronicled in *Nothing Finer,* and I found this book to be engaging and thorough in its scope. It is a must-read for every North Carolina sports fan, and for anyone with a general interest in the history of this great state and its culture.

Nine segments have been written by some of North Carolina's leading sports writers—"The DNA Factor" (Jim Sumner), "Baseball" (Wilt Browning), "Basketball" (Al Featherston), "Football" (Rob Daniels), "Racing" (Lenox Rawlings), "Golf" (Lee Pace), "Preps" (Tim Stevens), "North Carolina's Variety of Sports" (Larry Keech), and

"National Champions" (Bill Hass). I have read and appreciated the work of each of these individuals for many years. They share the aforementioned passion for North Carolina sports and its landscape, and each is uniquely qualified to pen a chapter of its history.

As the story unfolds—from Enos Slaughter to Buck Leonard to Charlie Justice; from David Thompson to Richard Petty to Gaylord Perry; from Arnold Palmer to Harvey Reid to Dick Groat; from Dean Smith to Junior Johnson to Kay Yow—the legendary figures of North Carolina sports and their accomplishments become all the more staggering.

In addition, the teams that brought national championship recognition to our state—the Wake Forest baseball squad of 1955; the NCAA basketball title teams from Duke, N.C. State, and UNC; the Tar Heels' women's soccer dynasty and many more—are chronicled here.

It is only fitting that *Nothing Finer* was produced through the cooperation and in concert with the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame and made its first public appearance at the 2014 Induction Banquet in Raleigh. For more than 50 years, the Hall of Fame has celebrated excellence and extraordinary achievement in athletics throughout our state, and this book is the perfect complementary piece to that mission.

Please enjoy this book. When it comes to the sports history of our state and the people who have made it what it is, I believe you will join me in agreeing that there is indeed nothing finer.

Preface

By Caulton Tudor

Angier native Caulton Tudor was an award-winning sports columnist for The Raleigh Times *and* The News & Observer *for almost 45 years and is now an on-line columnist for WRAL/Capitol Broadcasting Company of Raleigh. A 1999 inductee into the U.S. Basketball Writers Hall of Fame, Tudor was a recipient of the ACC's Marvin "Skeeter" Francis Award in 2012. Tudor and his tennis star wife Inez (Diz) reside in Raleigh with their young child Copper, a lightning-quick cocker spaniel with a wonderful attitude.*

As an elementary school student in Charlotte during the 1950s, Al Featherston went to bed with strangers.

Don't faint.

He wasn't alone. So did I. Only it was in the small North Carolina town of Angier rather than the sprawl of metro-Charlotte. Like Al, my alternating bed partners were a chorus of diverse, magnetic voices who occasionally had to battle heavy static in order to reach my ears—Ray Reeve, Bill Jackson, Add Penfield, Bill Currie and Jim Reid, a guy who would be elected mayor of Raleigh in 1963.

All were legendary broadcasters of ACC basketball during its infancy, a group of radio pioneers intent on telling the shot-by-shot, pass-by-pass, rebound-by-rebound evolution of Everett Case's emerging creation.

"I recall lying under my covers with that small radio, listening to Ray Reeve, Bill Jackson and Add Penfield doing ACC games," Featherston said. "The first game I remember seeing in person was the 1960 ACC Tournament. I was 11 years old.... We left right before the end of the State-Wake semifinal and I missed the Dave Budd-Anton Muehlbacher fight."

With that same keen appreciation for detail, Featherston has been watching basketball games involving teams from North Carolina and the ACC without fail since. What began with that trip to Raleigh with his father to watch Wake Forest's Len Chappell and Billy Packer, Duke's Carroll Youngkin and Howard Hurt, UNC's Lee Shaffer and York Larese, and N.C. State's "Moose" DiStefano and Danny Englehardt led to a lifetime of game trips.

Like the other authors you will read in this epic undertaking, Featherston's sports-writing work gradually has become a North Carolina treasure. No one has studied and catalogued Tobacco Road basketball more, first for *The Durham Sun*, then *The Durham Herald-Sun* and now as a freelance author and historian.

The seeds of that fertile sports writing career were sown under the warm sheets and blankets of that Featherston family home in Charlotte. Al watched the Tobacco Sports radio network cede much of its popularity to the Jefferson Pilot regional television network and from there to NBC, CBS, ABC, ESPN and beyond. Even so, the attachment to sports through radio has hardly died in North Carolina. That first wave of broadcasters eventually gave way to Woody Durham, Wally Ausley, Bob Harris, Gene Overby and now Stan Cotten, Gary Hahn, Jeff Charles, Jones Angell, their sidekicks and countless others faithfully involved in live game coverage.

* * *

The story of sports in North Carolina is the story of a majestic pine—one with a ceiling as high as a clear summer sky and rooted deeply in proud, fertile soil. This is an elegant, ageless tree with thick, sturdy branches laden with enough memories to cover everyone and everything in its long, stately shadow.

It's a saga that includes some of the most important achievements in sports history. From 19-year-old Babe Ruth hitting his first home run as a professional player (March 7, 1914) in Fayetteville to the NASCAR empire Richard Petty helped spearhead to the recent emergence of Cam Newton as an NFL star quarterback with the Carolina Panthers, North Carolina, its teams and, most of all, its sports fans, have been blessed with an extraordinary assortment of accomplishments.

The countless stars will live on and on through generational lore and journalistic documentation. Fans who never saw David Thompson sink a jump shot will hear about his breath-taking basketball exploits through books such as the one you are now holding.

Christian Laettner's game-winning shot against Kentucky; the coaching brilliance of Mike Krzyzewski, Dean Smith, Norman Sloan, Jim Valvano, Frank McGuire; the artistry of Catfish Hunter's pitching; the moment of ultimate triumph for young golfer Webb Simpson; the relentless will of Dale Earnhardt to rule stock car tracks; the unpredictability of a "Choo Choo" Justice touchdown run; the image of Rod Brind'Amour hoisting the Stanley Cup in a madcap Raleigh coliseum; and the amazing consistency of UNC's women's soccer program are merely a sampling of the lore that will outlive the men and women who created them.

That part of this sports vista we owe to the writers of this book and their many peers over the past 70 or so years. If North Carolina has been blessed with exceptional athletes, it's been just as blessed with men and women with the same sort of journalistic talent and professional pride.

* * *

As sports columnist for *The Winston-Salem Journal* for 36 years, Wilson native Lenox Rawlings earned a national reputation for his ability to take readers to his seat at any event, be it a game, a race, a round, a meet or a backroom policy meeting. If you polled sports writers nationally, there's a strong chance that Rawlings would be cited as the most versatile sports columnist of his era. A brilliant wordsmith and meticulous observer, Lenox could take his patrons from solemn Augusta National to Darlington Raceway's rowdy infield with an effortless, flawless delivery that made him as much of a must-read among his cohorts as the *Journal's* subscribers.

Rawlings covered his first stock car race at the Raleigh track where, a month later, NASCAR's top series ran on red clay for the last time. "I looked through the fence at the Wilson County Speedway a few times as a child and as a teen," Rawlings recalled.

At various times in his career, Rawlings worked for *The News & Observer, The Greensboro Daily News* and *The Atlanta Constitution* before going to Winston-Salem. He was selected president of the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, N.C. Sportswriter of the Year three times and was recipient of the Skeeter Francis Award from the Atlantic Coast Sports Media Association. He is a member of the U.S. Basketball Writers Hall of Fame and the Fike High School Athletic Hall of Fame in his hometown of Wilson.

But some of his fondest memories came when he covered races alongside the late Gerald Martin, perhaps the best automotive reporter/writer. "My favorite moments in racing came with Gerald at my side, showing me something for the first time," Lenox said. "He coaxed me into walking onto pit road near the drivers' entrance to the track at Darlington after the cars had begun their warm-up laps before the Southern 500."

Later, there was another moment closer to home. "Gerald and I also wound up a few feet away from the makeshift stage North Wilkesboro used for driver introductions the day Willy T. Ribbs—a black driver with open-wheel roots—made his debut in Wilkes County.... Gerald, who grew up near Martinsville Speedway, also introduced me to the moonshine men who operated tracks in the North Carolina/Virginia incubator."

* * *

With *The Raleigh Times* and later *The News & Observer*, Garner native Tim Stevens has changed the way high school sports are covered more than anyone in the newspaper industry. A remarkable man of many interests, Stevens took prep coverage far beyond game accounts of boys basketball and football. He expanded coverage to include everyone and has been able to teach his readers that sports participation is just as important as sports success.

On January 13, 2014, readers of *The News & Observer* sports section had the chance to read accounts of the Carolina Panthers' loss to San Francisco and the compelling story of Elizabeth Bohn, a Clayton teenager who had been awarded a sports scholarship to Texas Christian University as an equestrian. Stevens didn't write the story but he assigned it and brought about a newsroom sports culture that welcomed such diversity to its coverage.

* * *

The starting lineup of authors in this book amounts to a who's who of North Carolina sportswriters—Jim Sumner, Rob Daniels, Lee Pace, Larry Keech and Bill Hass. Their contributions to the state's sports culture couldn't be adequately measured if I had unlimited time and space to recount their careers. Keech, a fixture on *The Greensboro News & Record* staff, is a senior citizen who is equally comfortable at a bridge table or bungee jumping off a bridge. Pace is a walking history book of North Carolina golf on one hand and the sideline football reporter for the UNC network on the other.

But behind every lineup there has been a manager and this undertaking has been directed by an industry immortal—Wilt Browning, a man who sat on team buses

beside Hank Aaron and Satchel Paige and whose 1997 book *Deadly Goals* was the first serious piece of reporting on steroid use in sports.

Browning, who resides in Kernersville, covered baseball for *The Atlanta Journal* during a period in which Aaron was chasing the Ruth record for home runs. At various times, he then worked for the Atlanta Falcons and Baltimore Colts. Later, for *The Greensboro News & Record* and *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, Wilt treated his readers to a rare blend of folksy storytelling that was witty and clever, and always on point.

When Carolina Academic Press Editor Linda Lacy and her team reached the decision to put together *Nothing Finer: North Carolina's Sports History and the People Who Made It*, Wilt, who had dreamed for years of such a project, was the obvious choice to organize the mountain of details. There was never any doubt he would make it work, of course. But make no mistake, it was no can of corn.

"I'm not certain, but I think it will be a first of its kind in America," Browning said. "I doubt that any other state has a single-volume sports history as exhaustive as this."

As the late Bones McKinney was fond of saying, "Amen, brother, amen."

Editorial Note

If twenty newspapers assign sports writers to cover the same event, no two reports are likely to read the same. Some of the basics always will be in all versions—including the identities of the winners and losers, and the score of the game, of course—but perhaps little else. Indeed, all twenty writers may view the contest's turning point differently. Some will emphasize how the game, or the race or the match, was won, others may dwell on elements that brought about defeat. In most cases, each newspaper's reading audience also will play a role; in North Carolina, for example, writers understand that most readers are more interested in the ebb and flow of athletic fortunes at Carolina, State, Wake and Duke than those of out-of-state teams, such as Georgia Tech, Miami, Clemson or other out-of-the-region competition.

In every case, what the reader gets is a report of a sports contest based upon the perspective of an individual writer. And that's what you get in *Nothing Finer*, a one-of-a-kind recitation of the sports history of North Carolina from some the most talented of the people who have witnessed more of that history first-hand than any other segment of society—sports writers.

From the beginning of this project, the unique perspectives of the nine writers were important, sought and cherished. From the standpoint of recording history, we hope you will find that *Nothing Finer* offers much more than a mere restating of events and dates; that it also brings to life the stories behind the rich history of sports in the state. In the nine different segments, the perspective is solely that of the author of each section. It reflects his knowledge of what happened and what the historic significance was. You may not meet in these pages every one of the heroes of the past with whom you are familiar, but it is likely you will meet others whom you never knew.

And if, in the process, some of your own memories are reawakened, then there can be nothing finer nor more rewarding for the nine writers of *Nothing Finer*.