

## Blowout at Rupp Arena revives memories of NSU upset

Written by Jerry Byrd

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Kentucky's 82-44 rout of LSU Saturday brought to mind Dec. 7, 1988 — a day that will live in infamy for University of Kentucky basketball fans.

It took LSU 29 years to score a basketball victory over the Kentucky Wildcats, and 46 years to win a game at Lexington, Ky.

Dan Bell, 33-year-old head coach of the 1988-89 Northwestern State Demons, achieved both goals in the first two weeks of his head coaching career.

Saturday's blowout was LSU's first loss in Southeastern Conference play this season. The Northwestern State team that went to Lexington in December of 1988 was picked to finish last in the Southland Conference, and finished the season with a 13-16 record (7-7 in SLC play). But when they beat Kentucky 85-82 in the Wildcats' home opener, they pulled off what I still consider to be the biggest upset in college basketball history.

That team consisted of nine players, and was riding a three-game losing streak that included blowout losses at Houston and Ole Miss. None of the nine players had been recruited by any major-college program, much less Kentucky. One Demon, Mike Thornton, had never played organized basketball at any level.

Kentucky had high school All-Americans on the bench. Northwestern State had starters who didn't make All-District.

Kentucky was the winningest program in college basketball history, with five national championships and 37 Southeastern Conference championships, and had not lost a home opener since 1926 — four years before Adolph Rupp took over the coaching reins. A crowd of 18,932 spectators at Rupp Arena expected the Wildcats to make short work of a team that appeared to be overmatched.

"That's why basketball is a wonderful sport," Kentucky coach Eddie Sutton said after that game.

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“They have good athletes, and they played hard. They could’ve cracked, but they didn’t. Confidence just oozed out of their players. That will happen when you allow a team to stay in the game.”

In contrast, most observers expected Saturday’s Kentucky-LSU game to be a toss-up. But the 13th-ranked Wildcats led by 11 points less than eight minutes into the game, took a 29-point lead into the halftime intermission and continued to pull away in the second half.

“That was a good, old-fashioned ... whipping,’ summed up LSU coach Trent Johnson after Saturday’s drubbing.

Terrence Jones, who set a Kentucky freshman record with 35 points against Auburn, made only three of 12 field goal attempts Saturday, but still wound up with 17 points and seven rebounds in 23 minutes as the Wildcats held the Tigers to a season-low 26 percent field goal shooting, forced 15 turnovers, and extended their home winning streak to 28 games.

The Wildcats quickly ended LSU hopes of a second straight win at Rupp Arena. Garrett Green, who led LSU with 13 points, said, “They definitely lived up to the hype tonight.”

The presence of former LSU coach Dale Brown, seated next to Rudy Macklin in the stands, did little to inspire the Tigers.

Brown’s LSU teams scored 18 victories over Kentucky, the most any coach ever had against the Wildcats.

In Northwestern State’s 1988 upset win at Lexington, Captain Shreve product Roman Bates played a key role for the Demons. So did Larry Nelson, a true freshman from Bernice.

“It blows my mind,” Demons’ coach Bell said of the way Nelson kept his cool. “It makes me mad, because he can’t figure out he’s supposed to be nervous. He thinks he’s going over and playing Shady Grove or somebody. He had no idea he was in Rupp Arena.”

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Saturday, the LSU Tigers knew they were in Rupp Arena.

Jerry Byrd is sports editor of the Bossier Press-Tribune and an award-winning columnist. Check out a few hundred of his columns on [www.jerrybyrd.com](http://www.jerrybyrd.com). You can contact him by E-mail at [jbsportswriter@comcast.net](mailto:jbsportswriter@comcast.net)