

In the twenty-first century, when a college basketball team qualifies for the NCAA basketball tournament it is considered an occasion worthy of praise and celebration. When the team departs campus and arrives at the arena where the game will be played, they are usually met by thousands of excited fans, ready to support their school and hopefully cheer them on to a national championship. However, when the Mississippi State Men's Basketball team departed a small airport in Columbus, Mississippi on the morning of March 14, 1963 there was no one in sight. That was because at the time, the trip they were making to East Lansing, Michigan to play Loyola University of Chicago in the NCAA tournament was illegal. The previous day, State Senator Billy Mitts and Judge B.W. Lawson had filed an injunction barring the team from leaving the state. The reason for this injunction was because if Mississippi State was to play the game against Loyola, the team would be violating a law that did not exist in writing in the state of Mississippi, but nevertheless dominated how college athletics in the state operated during this time. This unwritten law stated that Mississippi schools were not to play teams that had black players, and by traveling to Michigan to play Loyola, Mississippi State was about to break this law.

The story of how Mississippi State left their hometown of Starkville to travel to East Lansing reads like a plot from an action movie. The previous day, Mississippi State University President Dean Colvard and Head Coach James "Babe" McCarthy had secretly driven out of Mississippi so that authorities could not find them to serve them a copy of the injunction. The next morning, a van full of freshmen players who were not going to play travelled to the local airport in nearby Columbus. If authorities were waiting for the team at the airport, the freshmen

players would serve as decoys willing to sacrifice themselves by being sent home. If this scenario were to unfold, another van filled with the team's most important players would travel to a different airfield on the other side of Starkville to fly out of the state. Due to heavy fog that morning, the plane coming in from Atlanta to take the players to the tournament was not yet at the airport when the van of freshmen players arrived, and they returned to campus. When a sheriff's deputy later arrived at the airport to make sure the team hadn't left, he saw the airport was empty and found no reason to stay. When the team received word that the plane had arrived from Atlanta and no deputies were on the scene, they returned to the airport and were able to take off. When the team was in the air leaving Mississippi, one player compared their escape to East Berliners making it past the Berlin Wall.¹

Coach McCarthy met the players in Nashville, and they flew to East Lansing together for the game. Before the game started, Mississippi State's white forward Joe Dan Gold shook hands at center court with Loyola's African American forward Jerry Harkness, the game's most iconic image². Mississippi State would lose to Loyola 61-51, but they later won a consolation game against Bowling Green while Loyola would go on to defeat Cincinnati to win the national championship. While the team was in Michigan, they learned that during their flight to East Lansing Justice Robert Gillespie of the Mississippi Supreme Court had suspended Mitts's injunction, making their trip legal.³

¹ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change: How The Mississippi State Bulldogs And Their Bold Coach Defied Segregation* (The History Press, Charleston, SC. 2012.) Pg 99

² This is not the photo on the cover page. That handshake is between Mississippi State's Stan Brinker and Loyola's Vic Rouse. AP Photo. *Handshake between Mississippi State's Stan Brinker and Loyola's Vic Rouse*. March 15, 1963. Mississippi State University Library Online Collection.

³ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*: Pg 107. Gillespie wrote that the injunction was "issued without authority of law and was improvidently issued without notice" (Veazy 107).

In order to play in the NCAA tournament, Mississippi State faced much greater obstacles than any opponent on their schedule. 1963 marked the fourth time in the last five seasons that Mississippi State had finished with the best record in the Southeastern Conference, but each of the previous three times they turned down their invitation to the NCAA tournament and watched an inferior SEC team go in their place. The reason for this was because, unlike Mississippi State and the southern teams on their schedules, the NCAA tournament consisted of integrated teams. The segregated state of Mississippi had a “unwritten law” that prevented their collegiate sports teams from playing integrated opponents. Unlike the public state defiance of integration, the unwritten law was more of a “gentlemen’s agreement” with integrated schools to avoid desegregated games. When playing a segregated school, an integrated team was expected to bench their black players. If they failed to comply, their opponent would forfeit rather than play against black players. Many other segregated southern states had a form of the unwritten law their schools were expected to follow, and the state of Mississippi’s first time dealing with this issue occurred in 1955 when the Jones County Junior College football team accepted a bid to play an integrated football team in Compton, CA in the Junior Rose Bowl.⁴ No team in Mississippi was forced to confront the unwritten law more than the Mississippi State basketball team, who faced this controversy every time they received an invitation to the NCAA tournament. In the case of the integrated NCAA tournament, the only way to uphold the unwritten law was for a team to decline their invitation.

⁴ Russell J. Henderson, “The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law: “Something more than the game will be lost.” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no.4 (1997) 827-854. After Jones County Junior College accepted the invitation, state legislators threatened to withhold appropriations from schools that violated the unwritten law.

The Mississippi State basketball team first dealt with the unwritten law in 1956 in an early season tournament in Evansville, Indiana. They were scheduled to play against the University of Denver in their first game, and were surprised to learn right before the game started that Denver had two African American players. Coach McCarthy agreed to play the game, but word quickly spread back to Mississippi that they had violated the unwritten law and played an integrated team.⁵ Mississippi State's victory over Denver qualified them for the championship game of the tournament, and the players got on the team bus the next day thinking they were heading to the game. Instead, they found out they were being sent home for violating the unwritten law. "Ridiculous," star player Bailey Howell later said, "It made you just feel sick."⁶ Ben Hilbun, the President of Mississippi State at the time, defended his decision in a letter to a Natchez rancher who wanted an explanation, saying "I believe in what the people of the state stand for. I will not, in my official actions, deviate from long standing policies and cherished traditions."⁷ Hilbun's response to this incident foreshadowed how Mississippi State would handle the unwritten law over the next few seasons.

For many Mississippians, protecting segregation and the unwritten law was far more important than being victorious in a basketball game. Accepting a bid to the NCAA tournament and potentially playing an integrated team was considered by many to be a dangerous game because it was seen as a sellout of their southern way of life and could open the door for further desegregation. After Mississippi State announced they would break the unwritten law and play

⁵ Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980*. (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, IL. 2010.) Pg 249

⁶ Cleveland, Rick. "It was a handshake captured for the ages." *The Clarion Ledger*, April 14, 2011.

⁷ Wolff, Alexander. "Ghosts of Mississippi." *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 2003.

Loyola in the 1963 tournament, the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* wrote, “If Mississippi State U. plays against a Negro outside the state, what would be greatly different about bringing the integrated teams into the state? And then why not recruit a Negro of special basketball ability to play on the Mississippi State team? This is the road we seem to be traveling.”⁸ This article expressed the fears many people in Mississippi had about breaking the unwritten law.

Years later, this game is remembered as a key turning point in the integration of college athletics. Known as the “Game of Change,” this story has been the subject of many books, articles, documentaries, and even a film made by the NCAA. Jack Ebling, the author of *Heart of a Spartan* called the Game of Change “one of the three most important basketball games ever played” in a 2013 video celebrating the game’s 50th anniversary⁹. Outside Jenison Field House at Michigan State University, where the game occurred, a plaque memorializes the game, calling it “one of the most memorable sporting events in the civil rights movement. It served as a vehicle to challenge racial segregation in athletics and helped to forever change college basketball and advance civil rights in this country.” When asked why Michigan State chose to memorialize a game in which they didn’t even play, their Athletic Director Mark Hollis said “Right here, in this special building, there is history that changed society.”¹⁰ Both schools that competed in the game, as well as Michigan State, take a great deal of pride knowing that their university was involved in one of the key catalysts of the advancement of civil rights for African Americans in college athletics.

⁸ Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow*. Pg 251.

⁹ Big Ten Network “50th Anniversary of ‘The Game of Change.’ Filmed February 2013. Youtube Video, 4:28. Posted {February 2013}. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=61&v=X3bqlA_59o

¹⁰ Ibid.

Mississippi State's trip to East Lansing in 1963 was long overdue. Although they had won the SEC championship in 1959, 1961, and 1962, they had turned down invitations to the NCAA tournament in each of those years to follow the unwritten law. On March 2, 1963, this changed when Mississippi State President Dean Colvard announced that he would break away from the unwritten law and let the team play in the tournament, aware that their first opponent would likely be an integrated team. "There is obscurity about the 'unwritten law'" Colvard said in his official statement. "Some say it is one thing; some another. And still others aver that it does not exist. Be that as it may, it is certain that there is precedent for the President of Mississippi State University to act in the matter of participation in the NCAA basketball championship competition."¹¹ The standard narrative surrounding Colvard's decision and the injunction and escape that followed was that the players, coaches, and university officials took a bold step in favor of civil rights. "A University President, defying his governor, and risking his job and safety . . . A team, fleeing the state and creating a landmark event in the process" said a narrator in the video explaining the Game of Change from the Loyola University Athletic Department.¹² "You had a bunch of white players in Mississippi that went against their President, their AD, and their governor and said no, we're playing the game" said current Michigan State Coach Tom Izzo near the game's 50th anniversary.¹³ "In March 1963, MSU coach Babe McCarthy decided enough was enough, and he defied virtually every person with power or influence in the state of Mississippi and accepted the NCAA tournament bid . . . Disgruntled segregationists throughout

¹¹ Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions* (The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Danville, IL. 1985.) Pg 65

¹² Loyola Ramblers "Game of Change." Filmed December 2012. Youtube video, 4:52. Posted {December 2012}. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=78&v=kPEiGHN3g2A

¹³ Big Ten Network "50th Anniversary of 'The Game of Change'". https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=61&v=X3bqlA_59o

Mississippi, many in high places, had been unhappy with the decision to accept the bid,” said an article on sportingnews.com near the game’s 50th anniversary.¹⁴

There is no denying that Mississippi State choosing to defy the unwritten law and play an integrated team was a bold decision, one that was a key catalyst in the advancement of integration in southern college athletics and a step forward toward full desegregation. It is clear that the players and coaches made an extremely brave decision when they were caught in the middle of a cultural struggle between those who wanted to continue segregation and those who did not. And it is clear that President Colvard made an extremely risky decision by choosing to send the team to the tournament, knowing he was going against the wishes of many powerful figures including the Governor, and he could have easily lost his job as a result. It is clear that the Game of Change is now seen as a key turning point for civil rights, but was that what it was intended to be? There were many other reasons why Colvard decided that it was in the best interests of the team and the University to go play in the tournament, and the narrative that this decision explicitly was made for the purpose of promoting civil rights and integration misses a key point. 1963 was in the heart of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, and the segregationist structure in the south was crumbling. By this time, the unwritten law was on its last legs and Colvard could no longer use the law as an excuse to keep the team at home. By 1963, Mississippi State University had much more to lose by keeping the team at home than by sending them to play in the tournament.

A major change that took place at Mississippi State during this time period was the introduction of their new President, Dean Colvard. Colvard took over as President in 1960, and it

¹⁴ Best, Bob. “Loyola vs. Mississippi State: The game that changed American culture.” sportingnews.com. <http://www.sportingnews.com/ncaa-basketball/news/4404814-game-of-change-loyola-mississippi-state/> (accessed November 15, 2017).

was immediately evident that he was different than any of his predecessors. Colvard was the first President in the school's history who was not a native Mississippian. Colvard grew up in North Carolina and attended college at Berea University in Kentucky, which would later be one of the schools at which the Freedom Riders requested to train at during the Civil Rights Movement. Prior to taking the Presidency at Mississippi State, he served as the Dean of Agriculture at North Carolina State University.¹⁵ Colvard had only visited Mississippi State once before being offered the job, and he "had not been greatly impressed."¹⁶ During his time at N.C. State, Colvard had been responsible for building educational institutions and developing programs. The two schools had a very similar background, which may have been one of the reasons why the school's board of trustees were willing to offer the job to a non-Mississippian. Colvard said he began to see the University as a "sleeping giant," and he began to envision the ways he could build up the University, which overrode his original negative impression and made him excited about the idea of "administering a university with a promising future and working to overcome the problems, whatever they might be."¹⁷ He wanted to transform the school from a land-grant institution into a major state university.

Colvard's outsider status made several Mississippians, including many powerful politicians, suspicious of his views regarding issues such as race. Colvard did not come from an environment that was dominated by racial segregation to the extent that Mississippi was in 1960. Colvard said in his autobiography "While no southern state had made great progress, North Carolina was ahead of Mississippi in making a small beginning toward desegregation in its

¹⁵ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 46

¹⁶ Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions*. Pg 1

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

universities.”¹⁸ N.C. State had integrated while Colvard was at the school, and he was now coming into a state where no public university was integrated despite the fact that the state was nearly 50% black, as opposed to only 25% in North Carolina. Colvard’s racial views were challenged early on in his tenure at the university. In April 1962, Colvard received harsh criticism from state officials for not withdrawing a speaking invitation to Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington, who was considered to be too moderate to be speaking in Mississippi. “Are you a nigger lover or a nigger hater?”¹⁹ a state legislator wrote to Colvard following this decision.

Colvard came to Mississippi State with a clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish and the type of university he wanted Mississippi State to become. He was a builder who saw the university as a sleeping giant that was ready to move forward and become more than a land grant university.²⁰ Colvard knew that in order to accomplish his goals, he was going to have to establish rapport with powerful politicians and state officials as well as build trust with the people of Mississippi. This would mean respecting the customs and traditions of the state, which at the time meant upholding segregation and following the unwritten law. Colvard distanced himself from the school’s decision to not send the team to the tournament in 1961 and 1962, saying he was not consulted about the decisions and it was made by the athletic department.²¹ In

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ Wolff, Alexander. “Ghosts of Mississippi.” *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 2003.

²⁰ J. Kenneth Sanford, *Mississippi Pride: The Story of Dean Wallace Colvard*. (Jones and Prestell Graphics, Charlotte, NC. 1980.) As President, Colvard founded a developmental foundation to work with potential university donors and got credit for making the university more friendly toward female students by having better dormitories built for women.

²¹ Russell J. Henderson, “The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law: 837. In a 1962 interview, MSU Athletic Director Wade Walker claimed the issue would only have gone to Colvard if the coach sought permission for the team to compete.

his autobiography, he claimed he was always in favor of the team being allowed to participate, saying

I wished that I could tell him (a student who asked him where he stood on the issue) that I felt as he did and that I would do everything in my power to see that Mississippi State University took its proper place in the final competition. Unfortunately, I had to keep that position to myself, knowing that there were several bases to be touched before I made any public statement.²²

Colvard also said in his autobiography that early on he felt “that I lacked the prestige to upset this longstanding, unwritten policy. . . I wanted the team to play, but my judgement told me to stick to the strategy of building a strong base.”²³ However, in 1963 the same process unfolded as had in previous years. On February 18, 1963, Mississippi State Athletic Director Wade Walker publicly said the team would continue to follow the unwritten law and stay at home, saying “As far as I’m concerned . . . the policy addressed to in the past of non-participation in integrated athletics is still in effect.”²⁴ This time however, Colvard chose to intervene and issued his statement stating he would send the team to the tournament. What made 1963 different from those previous years and prompted Colvard to take action? One of the many reasons may have been because of his relationship with Head Coach Babe McCarthy, who unlike Colvard was the ultimate Mississippi insider.

²² Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions*. Pg 62

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴ *The Lexington Herald*, 4 March 1963, Folder 8, Press clippings mailed in, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections, Mississippi State University Library.

Under Head Coach Babe McCarthy, Mississippi State basketball had achieved their best seasons in program history. Prior to his arrival in 1955, Mississippi State had just nine winning seasons in the programs history, and had never come close to competing in the SEC. McCarthy's teams quickly emerged as an SEC contender, partly due to McCarthy's skill as a recruiter. A native of Baldwin, Mississippi, and a former high school coach, McCarthy was able to recruit talented high school players all over the south. McCarthy was an excellent salesperson, and that skill helped him greatly to recruit players to Starkville. Player Doug Hutton described McCarthy as someone who "could sell a refrigerator to an eskimo."²⁵ He would later develop the nickname "Magnolia Mouth."

McCarthy's forceful personality, as well as the breakout seasons the basketball teams had shortly after his arrival made him a beloved public figure all throughout Mississippi. Before home games, McCarthy would address a roaring crowd with a microphone and urge more fans to enter the gym. "The students loved him . . . When they'd introduce the starting lineup and then introduce 'Head Coach Babe McCarthy,' he always got the biggest cheer"²⁶ said Hutton. Following a pep rally in 1963 after it was announced the team would play in the tournament, it was reported that "over a thousand cheering Mississippi State Students crowded into Lee Hall Auditorium . . . As Coach McCarthy spoke, the rafters literally shook with the shouts of the enthusiastic students, so much so, in fact, that several times he had to stop the applause to

²⁵ Michael Lenehan, *Ramblers: Loyola Chicago 1963- The Team That Changed The Color of College Basketball*. (Midway Books, Chicago, IL. 2013.) Pg 32.

²⁶ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 29.

speak.”²⁷ Another former player said that if McCarthy had wanted to, he could have been elected the Governor of Mississippi.²⁸

“As a real true segregationist bred in Mississippi . . . I would not want to jeopardize the segregationist cause in my state.”²⁹ Babe McCarthy said this to *The Clarion-Ledger* in 1959 after it was announced that Mississippi State would not participate in the NCAA tournament. However, by 1962 after Mississippi State was held out again because of the unwritten law, McCarthy was thinking differently, having now seen three SEC champion teams not be allowed to play for the national title. “I think the boys should be allowed to play against integrated teams away from home,”³⁰ he told the *MSU Reflector*. He said he believed that the majority of Mississippians agreed with him. It was becoming evident that by 1963 McCarthy was ready to play in the tournament, and rumors surrounding his future at the school began to circulate if the team was kept at home again. Robert Fulton, a columnist for a local paper wrote an article in February 1963 saying he believed McCarthy would leave if Mississippi State couldn’t participate in the 1963 tournament for another school’s lucrative offer. The article said

How many times can a man swallow his pride?. How many times can a man of McCarthy’s restlessness to compete have a fence built around him and be told “Okay, you’ve gone far enough. You’re probably good enough to go further but you can’t” . . . When a fence is

²⁷ “Pep Rally.” *MSU Reflector*, March 14, 1963. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

²⁸ Michael Lenehan, *Ramblers*: Pg 32.

²⁹ Russell J. Henderson, “The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law.” 835.

³⁰ Scotty Hargrove. ‘Unwritten Law’ “Again stops Maroons short of tourney.” *MSU Reflector*, March 8, 1962. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

built around a thoroughbred, the grass always looks greener on the other side. Mississippi's "unwritten law" has built such a fence around McCarthy.

This article was attached to a letter sent to President Colvard in 1963 petitioning him to allow the team to go to the tournament. It read "This article brings out many of our views. We asked you before how you stand and you evaded an answer. If you cannot take a stand as a President, you can take a stand as a man! . . . Don't lose our coach for our school. PLEASE."³¹ The letter was signed by almost a dozen people.

Colvard admitted to making decisions in his tenure at Mississippi State that violated his principles, but he knew he had to make them in order to create trust and rapport with the community as well as prominent state figures. For the first couple of years, the decision that would have done that was to keep the team at home rather than violate the unwritten law, but the rumors surrounding McCarthy's future at the school in 1963 put Colvard in a bind. McCarthy was a native Mississippian and a beloved public figure, while Colvard was an outsider who was still working to build rapport in Mississippi in order to accomplish his goals. If McCarthy had left the school as a result of Colvard once again deciding to uphold the unwritten law, the people of Mississippi could have very easily turned on Colvard and made him the scapegoat for McCarthy's departure. The optics would have been terrible for Colvard in this situation: an outsider President coming in and driving out the beloved insider basketball coach who was leading the most successful teams in school history. From the beginning of the 1963 season, McCarthy made it perfectly clear he was tired of watching his SEC champion teams being unable to compete for the greater prize. According to team manager Jimmy Wise, McCarthy said

³¹ Letter to Dean Colvard, February 1963, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections, Mississippi State University Library.

to the team prior to the 1963 season, “Guys I’m gonna make a promise to you. If you win the championship again this year, I’m gonna do everything in my power to get us to the tournament.”³² McCarthy knew this would mean lobbying powerful figures, including Colvard, to give him what he wanted. After all, McCarthy had attributed much of his recruiting success to being a master manipulator and salesperson. McCarthy may have known that he held power over Colvard, and he used the threat of leaving to pressure Colvard into giving him what he wanted.

For players and fans who had never witnessed any kind of success from their basketball program, simply winning the SEC was enough cause for celebration. However, 1963 was the fourth time in five years Mississippi State had won the SEC, and each of the previous three times, they had turned down their invitation to the NCAA tournament to avoid playing integrated schools. The first time came in 1959, when the team finished with a record of 24-1. The record was the best in school history and they were led by Bailey Howell, who set numerous school records and would later go on to play for the NBA’s Detroit Pistons. Mississippi State finished the season ranked fourth in the final AP poll and beat several SEC schools, including Kentucky, who was then coached by Adolph Rupp, one of the most successful coaches in the history of the sport. In 1961, Mississippi State would once again win the SEC with a record of 19-6. In those years, the decision to keep Mississippi State at home was somewhat expected and “an opposite decision would have probably evoked more surprise than jubilation.”³³ Winning the SEC in those years was enough to satisfy most of the players, coaches, and fans of the program.

The 1962 season was arguably the best season in school history. Led by four returning starters, Mississippi State finished the season 24-1 for the second time in four years and won the

³² Michael Lenehan, *Ramblers*. Pg 194

³³ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 41

SEC for the third time in four years. In doing so, they won one of their biggest games in school history by going on the road and defeating Rupp's Kentucky Wildcats. The Clarion Ledger's Carl Walters called the win "one of the all-time greatest sports accomplishments by a Mississippi team."³⁴ If the decision to keep the team at home in 1959 and 1961 was considered to be expected and normal, keeping the team at home in 1962 in order to protect the unwritten law would have been much more disappointing and painful for players, coaches, and fans. To add insult to injury, Mississippi State had to watch the Kentucky team they had beaten go to the tournament in their place.

The honeymoon phase was coming to an end, and by 1963 many believed more than an SEC championship was needed for the team to continue its success. The 1963 team had four returning starters in Joe Dan Gold, Leland Mitchell, Red Stroud, and Bobby Shows. All four players had major roles in the previous year's SEC championship and were some of the best players in the team's history, but all four of them were entering their senior season in 1963. With so many talented players set to graduate at the end of the year, there was a sense that 1963 could be the last season for a while Mississippi State would even have the opportunity to turn down a tournament bid. An uncertain future awaited the Mississippi State basketball program following their departure, as maintaining success would require a tremendous amount of recruiting. For as skilled of a recruiter as McCarthy was, it would be extremely difficult for him to lure high school players away from competing SEC schools, especially if the players knew if they came to Mississippi State they would not have a chance to compete for the National Championship

³⁴ Ibid., 66.

regardless of how well they performed. These fears were expressed in a letter sent by many alumni to Colvard in December of 1962, reading

We are now at the turning point of Mississippi State basketball . . . the recruiting of top high school players is becoming more difficult . . . We have to compete with Kentucky, other SEC Powers, and especially other national powers. It all comes down to this frightening fact; the top boys are leaving this year . . . If Mississippi State is to continue to produce top basketball teams we must give them an equal chance. They certainly don't have it now.³⁵

The letter also called the decision to keep the team home in previous years “nothing short of a tragedy” and had the ominous warning that if no change were to come, 1963 would be the team's last chance to compete nationally, since so many great players were leaving and it would be difficult to recruit more talented players.

While the Mississippi State basketball team was playing during the 1963 season, a major struggle was also taking place in the state of Mississippi. 1963 was in the heart of the Civil Rights era, and the segregationist structure that had existed in the state was beginning to come apart. Just five months before the tournament decision, James Meredith had become the first black student to enroll at Ole Miss, sparking riots that left two dead and led to the National Guard being called in to ensure Meredith's safety on campus. This was a very significant event for Mississippi State because now that Ole Miss was integrated, it was only a matter of time before Mississippi State would integrate as well. Colvard understood this and wrote in his autobiography “While I had succeeded in keeping Mississippi State University on a relatively steady course, it was sobering to realize that this confrontation could have happened on our

³⁵ Letter to Dean Colvard 8 December 1962, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections, Mississippi State University Library.

campus and that our turn at the bat would come all too soon.”³⁶ The integration of Ole Miss was a significant event in the process that led to Colvard’s decision because it caused many Mississippians to question the legitimacy of the unwritten law. The law’s main purpose was to protect segregation, and the integration of Ole Miss signified that the law had failed to serve its purpose. When it became clear that Mississippi State would once again be offered an invitation to the NCAA tournament, many Mississippians questioned why the school should still obey a law that was not official nor effective. “We are kidding ourselves when we attempt to justify it on the basis that we are safeguarding segregation . . . Ole Miss has been integrated, and so State’s foregoing the national basketball tournament has not safeguarded segregation”³⁷ wrote a Yazoo City man in a letter to Colvard urging him to allow the team to participate. Another letter sent to Colvard read “Now that one of our state universities is integrated, it seems a little foolish for us to refuse to let our team play in the tournament. We might just as well refuse to play Old Miss.”³⁸ Events such as the integration of Ole Miss and the ongoing Civil Rights Movement were beginning to chip away at the unwritten law in 1963. In earlier years, it would have been easy to defend upholding the unwritten law, since the Civil Rights Movement was still in its early stages and the basketball team was less familiar with success. By 1963, fans were beginning to feel like the team was leaving an opportunity on the table by staying home during the tournament to protect the unwritten law, and they were questioning the effectiveness of the law itself. The fans

³⁶ Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions*. Pg 38

³⁷ Letter to Dean Colvard, 28 February 1963, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

³⁸ Letter to Dean Colvard, 27 February 1963, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

of the basketball team, many of which were students at Mississippi State, would play a major role in Colvard's decision.

The success of the basketball team in the late 1950s and early 1960s led to a major increase in the team's popularity throughout the state. Mississippi State was undergoing its best stretch in school history, and had struggled to have success in other major sports such as football during this time. Fans rallied around the basketball team, and games during these years were packed with cheering fans with cowbells. "It was packed . . . They were standing up on the steps at the end, all the way up and down the other side. They were on the rafters, where the lights were. They were everywhere"³⁹ said former player Jack Berkshire. Much of the popularity was centered around Coach McCarthy, but during this time the gymnasium that Mississippi State played homes games at was a nightmare for opposing teams.

A passage from *The Reflector*, the Mississippi State student newspaper from March of 1962 questions whether the majority of Mississippians supported the unwritten law. It stated

It is most unfortunate that Mississippi State's fine basketball team will not have the opportunity to compete and show the nation what a fine team it is . . . But the ruling was set forth that the unwritten law. . . was in effect again. The lawmakers refused to pass a resolution concerning the matter so apparently it reflects the feelings of the people. We wonder if this is so.⁴⁰

In March of 1962, fans had just watched a 24-1 SEC Championship team get denied an NCAA tournament trip because they might have to play a team with black players. The exact

³⁹ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 29.

⁴⁰ "Conservation For What?." *MSU Reflector*, March 15, 1962. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

same situation had unfolded in 1959, but back then it might have been easier for fans to accept because they were celebrating winning the SEC for the first time in school history. By 1962, fans were more accustomed to winning the SEC and wanted more, and many were growing frustrated with the unwritten law. In 1963, frustrations reached a new high after it became clear the team was going to win the SEC again. Colvard's office became flooded with letters from fans encouraging him to let the team play and ignore the unwritten law. These letters came from throughout Mississippi, and many came directly from Mississippi State alumni. "I am not proud of the pointless, post civil war, 'unwritten law' which prohibits Mississippi college athletic teams from participating in integrated National Tournaments . . . What will be gained if our team stays home? We will again, as in years past, be ridiculed . . . for being backwards and narrow minded"⁴¹ wrote an alumnus to Colvard in February 1962. "In my opinion, we are acting to please Khrushchev, the NAACP, all communists, and all radicals by keeping Mississippi State Championship Basketball team at home"⁴² wrote another man to Colvard in February of 1963. While Colvard did receive several letters from people opposed to sending the team to the tournament, many of the letters he got in support reiterated the same point: the majority of Mississippians wanted the team to go in 1963. "Contacts with Alumni and friends indicate that at least 90% favor your decision"⁴³ wrote the President of MSU Alumni Association in Lawrence County to Colvard following his decision. "I would like to commend you on making a decision that very few citizens and no Politicians would make, even with the majority of the people in

⁴¹ Letter to Dean Colvard, 26 February 1962, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁴² Letter to Dean Colvard, 26 February 1963, Folder 3. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁴³ Letter to Dean Colvard, 5 March 1963, Folder 1. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

Mississippi in favor⁴⁴ wrote another alumni. The Jackson TV station WJTV took a poll and found that 85% of respondents from 27 different counties were in favor of participation.⁴⁵

Colvard received support from *The Tupelo Journal*, *The Starkville News*, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* and the Millsaps College *Purple and White* after making his decision.⁴⁶

On the campus of Mississippi State, students were very vocal about their feelings in favor of participation. The Student Senate unanimously voted in favor of sending the team, and decided to circulate a petition throughout the dorms and send a copy of their resolution to the Governor, state legislature, and all members of the Board of Education.⁴⁷ After a victory over Tulane, students staged a sit in on Colvard's lawn, and some even threatened to march on the State Capitol Building on the team's behalf.⁴⁸ An effigy of Billy Mitts and Judge Lawson was hung up on the campus by many angry students after the injunction was announced. By 1963 there was every indication that the vast majority of fans and students were in favor of participation, putting even more pressure on Colvard to make a decision that would be supported and appease the masses. In his official statement permitting participation in the tournament, Colvard directly addressed the views of the numerous students and fans who had contacted him, saying "The Student Senate has passed unanimously a resolution in favor of playing. A petition

⁴⁴ Letter to Dean Colvard, 5 March 1963, Folder 1. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁴⁵ Russell J. Henderson, "The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law" 842.

⁴⁶ "Bulldogs Bound For East Lansing." *MSU Reflector*, March 7, 1963. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁴⁷ "Bulldogs should be allowed to play in NCAA Touney." *MSU Reflector*, March 7, 1963. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁴⁸ Russell J. Henderson, "The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law" 832.

signed by some 3,000 students, communications from interested alumni, and friends of the institution, and resolutions from alumni chapters all convey an overwhelming persuasion in favor of playing.”⁴⁹ Although Colvard did receive letters in favor of upholding the unwritten law, the overwhelming majority of letters sent to Colvard by alumni, fans, and students throughout Mississippi favored participation.

Throughout the rest of the country, the state of Mississippi was seen in an extremely negative fashion. The state was associated with racism, violence, and being stuck in the past. In Colvard’s autobiography, he wrote “This was a time when Mississippians traveling in other states were tempted to rent cars rather than drive their own with license plates that identified them.”⁵⁰ Colvard’s decision made many elsewhere support the university and view the state in a more positive image. The *Kentucky Kernel* wrote “This step by President Colvard deserves commendation for it is through men like him that universities and colleges throughout the south may someday be free of racial prejudice. His is a step in the right direction.”⁵¹ Another newspaper in Iowa endorsed the basketball team to win their sportsman of the year award, saying

Despite every legal and political pressure that the Governor of Mississippi could apply to prevent it, they chose to participate in the integrated National Collegiate basketball tournament . . . They knew the chances were heavily in favor of their having to return to the

⁴⁹ Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions*. Pg 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵¹ “A Sensible Move Down in Mississippi.” *The Kentucky Kernel*. 12 March 1963, Folder 8. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

campus as the losers to a primary negro team. Nevertheless, they played and lost . . . like gentlemen.⁵²

The significance of the game was not lost on Mississippi State's opponent in the tournament: Loyola University of Chicago. Even among integrated teams, the way Loyola used their black players was considered to be radical for the time. "The unspoken rule then was two blacks at home, if you had to play them, and one on the road. I played four and rarely substituted"⁵³ said Loyola coach George Ireland. Some black Loyola players were from the south and had come to Loyola because they were not recruited by SEC schools. They held a personal grudge against southern teams, and Ireland would frequently leave his starters in when Loyola played segregated southern teams to run up the score. "We weren't just playing a team, we were playing an ideology"⁵⁴ said Loyola's Les Hunter.

Loyola entered the game with respect for Mississippi State, although they were a segregated southern team. Ireland ordered his players to play a clean game, and no incidents occurred. The most memorable moment came before the game, when Mississippi State's Joe Dan Gold shook hands with Loyola's Jerry Harkness at center court. "I remember looking him in his eyes and we kind of nodded. I saw a warmth, like hey, I just want to be here to play the game"⁵⁵ Harkness later said. After the game, the Michigan State Business Manager sent a letter to Colvard praising the team's composure and his action, writing "Even though we had anxious

⁵² "Mississippi State Cagers should win Sportsman of the Year Award." *Maquoketa Community Press*. n.d. Folder 8. Dean Colvard Papers. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁵³ Fimrite, Ron. "It was more than just a game" *Sports Illustrated*. November 18, 1987.

⁵⁴ Wolff, Alexander. "Ghosts of Mississippi." *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 2003.

⁵⁵ Michael Lenehan, *Ramblers*. Pg 219. Harkness and Gold would become lifelong friends, and Harkness travelled to Kentucky to attend Gold's funeral when he died in 2011.

moments before the team arrived, I do think the barrier has been broken somewhat and would like to see future Mississippi State teams participate in other tournaments no matter where played throughout the country.”⁵⁶ This was one of many letters Colvard received from all over the country praising how the team and university handled the situation. The outside letters and press coverage of this event was very supportive of Colvard’s decision.

The minority in Mississippi that did not support participation were loud, vocal, and very powerful. The powerful minority in favor of upholding the unwritten law were the segregationist politicians and state officials that had great influence throughout Mississippi at this time. These men had a powerful influence over Colvard, since they had the power to remove him of his position⁵⁷ and were already inherently suspicious of Colvard’s outsider views on these issues. Among them was Governor Ross Barnett, a fierce defender of segregation who had taken a firm stance against James Meredith’s integration at Ole Miss a few months earlier. Barnett said participation was “not in the best interests of Mississippi State University, the State of Mississippi, or either of the races.”⁵⁸ While Barnett did not use his power to influence Colvard’s decision,⁵⁹ he made it clear that he supported the unwritten law.

As long as Colvard was President, he would be under pressure to please these prominent figures, but in 1963 so many circumstances had made it that his university’s own students, many

⁵⁶ Letter to Dean Colvard, 19 March 1963, Folder 8. Dean Colvard Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁵⁷ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 94. At a Board of Trustees meeting following the approval of Colvard’s decision, board member M.M. Roberts issued a motion to force Colvard’s resignation. It was not seconded.

⁵⁸ Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow*. Pg 250.

⁵⁹ Michael Lenehan, *Ramblers*. Pg 197. Barnett’s influence on the Ole Miss incident attracted the attention of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, who warned him that the state board of higher education was supposed to operate free of political interference. Barnett could not get caught interfering with the board’s decision again or state universities could face disaccreditation.

alumni groups, and fans from all over Mississippi were begging him not to. If Colvard had appeased Barnett and other state officials by again following the unwritten law, he could have continued to build rapport with powerful Mississippi state figures and citizens in favor of upholding segregation in college athletics. He also would be faced with watching the basketball team, cheered on by students and fans all over the state, possibly lose their beloved coach. He could then see them struggle to recruit players to replace their departing seniors and fall back to the bottom of the SEC. He would be faced with losing the respect of his students, alumni, and the majority of Mississippians who just wanted to see their team get the chance to compete on a national stage, and they could have made him out to be a scapegoat for the decline of the basketball program. He would be doing all this to protect an unwritten law that had already proven to be ineffective in upholding a segregationist power structure that was already coming apart, and be upholding principles that he admitted he didn't even believe in. After the backlash from state officials to Colvard's decision to send the team, the *MSU Reflector* wrote

The minority that opposes State's participation cites as their only reason a so-called "let down of ideals." Is it not a let-down of ideals when athletes are denied the right to enjoy the rewards of a season's labor? Is it not a let-down of ideals when students are refused the privilege of cheering on their team in national competition? . . . This decision should rest with Mississippi State University, and the university alone. And we have decided.⁶⁰

An earlier article defending Colvard issued a similar sentiment, saying "Should a dynamic university be lead by a man with the intelligence to make a decision on the merits of the case and the guts to back it up? Or, should that university be led by a man, who out of fear for his

⁶⁰ "Pep Rally." *MSU Reflector*, March 14, 1963. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

job, would listen to and be persuaded by the politicians who are usually trying to create votes?"⁶¹

By 1963 it was clear that while the minority opposing participation was very vocal and powerful, it was in fact a minority.

For many Mississippians who supported segregation and opposed breaking the unwritten law, the changes they feared became a reality in the years that followed. In the summer of 1965, Mississippi State received an application from Richard Holmes, an African-American native of Starkville. Colvard was desperate to avoid a similar incident to what happened at Ole Miss and asked alumni to use their resources to make sure everything was peacefully, believing that he was "personally and officially responsible for the safety of this student. Not only that, but in large measure the quality and future of Mississippi State University are directly related to how this situation is handled."⁶² Colvard got his wish and Holmes was admitted without incident in July of 1965.

The full integration of athletics at Mississippi State was a slow process, but began with the tournament appearance. After integrating the university two years after the game, Mississippi State had more full time black students than other major southern universities that had integrated earlier such as Ole Miss, Clemson, and North Carolina State within the next five years. However, it wasn't until the early 1970s when southern universities began to make the effort to fully integrate athletics. This came out of the need to be able to compete nationally against fully

⁶¹ "NCAA?" *MSU Reflector* editorial, March 7, 1963. Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

⁶² Letter from Dean Colvard to Alumni Leaders, 26 June 1965, Box 9. Integration at MSU Papers, Mississippi State University Archives and Special Collections. Mississippi State University Library.

integrated teams. Mississippi State integrated their football team in 1969, and in 1972 Larry Fry and Jerry Jenkins became the school's first black basketball players.⁶³

Despite the tournament appearance, Mississippi State was still unable to maintain their success in basketball in the years going forward or keep Coach McCarthy in Starkville much longer. After two difficult seasons following the 1963 tournament appearance, McCarthy resigned as the coach after it was revealed he was having an affair with another woman. Former player Joe Dan Gold returned to coach the team, but he was unable to replicate McCarthy's success and the basketball team fell back to the bottom of the SEC. The next time Mississippi State would play in the NCAA tournament was 28 years later in 1991.⁶⁴ Many of the players on that team were black, and future basketball players and coaches for Mississippi State viewed these events as a key turning point for the advancement of civil rights in southern college athletics. While the results speak for themselves and it is clear violating the unwritten law was a bold decision, by 1963 the unwritten law was coming apart and President Colvard had much more to lose by following the law than by breaking it.

⁶³ Dean Colvard, *Mixed Emotions*. Pg 135.

⁶⁴ Kyle Veazy, *Champions For Change*. Pg 111.