

# CHC - Vandy Makes Elite Eight in 1965

by Bill Traugher

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*Vanderbilt's 78-74 double overtime victory over Washington State in the 2007 NCAA Tournament propelled the Commodores into the Sweet Sixteen. The Commodores have put themselves in a position to equal Vanderbilt's farthest advancement in the tournament. This is the story of the 1964-65 Vanderbilt team that reached the Elite Eight of the tournament.*

The Vanderbilt Commodores' team leaped into the 1964-65 basketball season with a great deal of experience and optimism. All five starters returned from a fourth-place finish in the SEC the previous year with a 19-6 overall record. Led by junior center All-American Clyde Lee, the Associated Press gave the Commodores a preseason ranking of No. 6.



Clyde Lee

Coach Roy Skinner's men began the season with home wins over Rice, SMU and Western Kentucky. The impressive margins of victory enabled Vandy to climb into the third spot in the rankings behind powerful Michigan and Wichita. The first road trip of the season would slow down the Commodores' ambition.

A 69-64 upset loss at Virginia Tech dropped Vandy to ninth in the rankings. Two days later, the Commodores traveled to North Carolina and lost, 84-78. Vanderbilt team captain, John Ed Miller, regrouped his teammates and won the Vanderbilt Invitational Tournament. They followed that by winning the Sugar Bowl Tournament in New Orleans, beating Texas Tech and Louisville.

"When we went on that road trip, we were third or fourth in the country," said Clyde Lee, the only Vandy men's basketball player to have his jersey retired. "On that road trip all the teams ahead of us got beat, and if he had won on the road trip, we would have been No. 1. It was one of those things where we were cold. We couldn't shoot well, and we played two tough teams. It did not hurt our chemistry or our attitude at all. We bounced back from it pretty well."

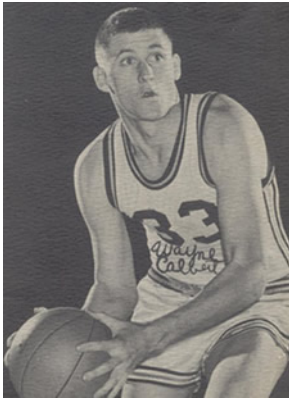
SEC play began with eight consecutive wins, followed by a loss at Tennessee, then finished the regular season with seven consecutive wins. Their 23-3 record with a 15-1 conference mark gave Vanderbilt its first SEC championship ever and an automatic bid to the 16-team NCAA National Tournament.

"We were very optimistic about going into the regional," said John Ed Miller from his Nashville home. "At the time we were ranked fifth in the nation, and the competition in the SEC was beginning to pick up, which made us better. We were certainly proud of our achievements in terms of winning the conference championship. It was a great feeling. This group of folks was a team that had a lot of confidence in each other."

The Commodores left for the NCAA Midwest Regional tournament in Lexington, Ky.,

which included Dayton (21-6), DePaul (17-8) and Michigan (21-3). Vanderbilt entered their first game with a NO. 5 ranking against legendary coach Ray Meyer's Blue Demons. Commodore starters, Lee, Miller, Bob "Snake" Grace, Keith Thomas and Wayne Taylor opened the regional against DePaul, followed by No. 1 Michigan pitted against Dayton.

Kentucky's Memorial Coliseum hosted this event before a crowd of 12,000 fans, and including an estimated 2,500 from Nashville. The Commodores took a 39-32 lead at the intermission. After stretching the lead to nine in the second half, the Demons began to use a full-court press. The press forced Vanderbilt into mistakes as a 60-52 Vanderbilt advantage was cut to 74-70.



*Wayne Calvert*

With 2:06 left in regulation Tom Meyer, the coach's son, stole the ball from Miller and drove to the basket, making the score, 74-72. Vandy's Wayne Calvert's followed with a lay-up, but was called for a foul at the Demons goal. DePaul's Jim Murphy hit both free throws tying the game. The Demon's press forced an errant pass over Taylor's head, losing possession.

The Commodores almost won the game in regulation, when Lee retrieved a pass down court. However he was called for traveling with seven seconds. Murphy missed a long shot at the buzzer, sending the game into overtime at 76-all. With the Commodores ahead in the overtime, 78-76, Lee fouled DePaul's Errol Palmer, after Palmer's field goal tied the game. This was Lee's fifth foul and the left the game for the bench.

"I almost blew it," said Lee, who was the third pick in the 1966 NBA draft. "Right at the end of regulation, Wayne Taylor threw me a pass, and I got called for traveling, when I would have had a lay-up and won the game there. Taylor got mad at me, but we went on to win it."

Palmer missed the foul shot and two free throws by Miller gave the Commodores an 80-78 lead with 1:30 remaining. Vandy again gained possession with the two-point lead, when Miller was once again sent to the line. He missed the foul shot, but Vandy substitute Ron Green, grabbed the rebound, allowing Vandy to keep possession.

Taylor was fouled with seven seconds as he hit the first of a one-and-one, increasing the lead to three. Taylor's second attempt kicked off the rim back into the hands of Green. Green passed the ball to Calvert, who converted a jumper for an 83-78 win and the Commodores first NCAA Tournament victory in history. Lee led the Commodores in scoring with 24 points. Thomas finished with 18, Miller 16, and Calvert 12.

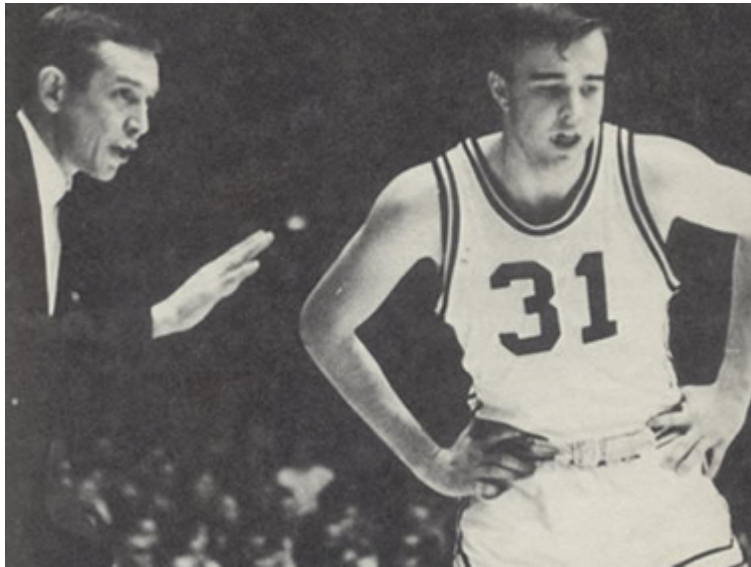
"In the DePaul game, we really didn't play that well, but we won in overtime," said Miller who was twice named as a guard on the First Team All-SEC squad. "We felt that, because of the way we played, we were fortunate to win the game. In all the time that I was at Vanderbilt, there were only two games that we thought we were going to lose at any time during the game. The rest of the time we didn't think we were going to lose. We had confidence in each other, and the coaching, and we just knew there was going to be some way for us to win.

"If you go back and look at the record of the seniors while we were sophomores,

with the close games, by and large, we won those close games. It never entered our minds that we would not beat DePaul. We had played so poorly against DePaul, and Michigan had played so well against Dayton. They were awesome. Some of our fans came around for our pregame meal, and they were telling us 'Gee, it was a great season, these guys are really good, we're proud of you etc.' After they left, we thought, 'What is going on here?' They thought the season was over, but in our minds we knew we could play with anyone."

After the Commodores' win the team watched from the stands as Michigan devoured Dayton, 98-71. Dave Strack was the Michigan coach, with All-American Cazzie Russell his leader for the Big Ten Conference champions. The winner of the Vanderbilt-Michigan game would compete the following weekend in the Final Four in Portland, Ore.

The underdog Commodores jumped out to a 24-17 lead in the first 10 minutes with Lee, Miller and Thomas carrying the first half burden. Russell's Wolverines took advantage of 12 Commodore turnovers giving Vandy a slim 39-38, halftime lead.



*Coach Roy Skinner and John Ed Miller*

"Bob Grace and I both got four fouls early in the game," Lee said. "Mine came very, very quickly. Coach Skinner first sat me down, and then he decided he was going to play me one way or another. I played a large part of the first half with four fouls and the entire second half with four fouls without fouling out. The biggest way I got into foul trouble, and I'll never forget this, because I don't fully understand today. The first two times I got the ball offensively, with my back to the basket, I made a little drop-step move and was whistled instantly for an offensive foul.

"Watching the tapes, it appeared that my elbow kind of wrapped around, and I guess the official thought I was hooking the guy. Keith Thomas who did a very good job of guarding Cazzie Russell did foul out before the game was over so we had to overcome the foul problems."

The Wolverines took the second half lead, 49-47, on Larry Tregoning's basket. A Russell free throw upped the lead to 50-47, but Lee led the Commodores back giving his team a 57-56 edge. Vanderbilt held the lead until Russell's jumper at the 1:33 mark put Michigan ahead 81-80. Another costly Vanderbilt floor mistake gave the ball back to the Wolverines.

Michigan's Bill Buntin then hit a short jump shot, extending the lead to 83-80 with 1:07 on the clock. Vandy added a free throw. Michigan responded with basket and Miller answered with a two-pointer, cutting the lead to 85-83. Michigan's Oliver

Darden made it, 87-83, on the two foul shoots with 10 seconds left. Calvert hit a jumper with one second on the clock to finish the game. Michigan squeaked out an 87-85 win.

"The Michigan people did not think very highly of us," said Lee. "They thought we were overrated as a team and that I was over rated as an individual, having made the All-American team. Then, after the ballgame several Michigan fans came up to us and said they didn't realize how good we were, and we did deserve the ranking. We made a few believers out of some Big Ten folks that night. They didn't know how good SEC basketball was."

Vanderbilt fouled the Wolverines on three separate occasions in the final minute, and on each occasion, Michigan missed the front end of a one-and-one. However, the Commodores did not get any of the rebounds. Then, a crucial traveling call by the officials on Miller in the last minute was also a damaging.



Keith Thomas

"Regardless of the outcome, it was a terrific game," said Miller. "Neither team led the other team by more than six or seven points at any time in the game, which made it very exciting. We had some foul difficulty. Clyde had four fouls, while 'Snake' had three and got his fourth within the first two minutes of the second half. Therefore, we had to play a looser defense inside than we would have otherwise and that created some problems.

"Here we are with two minutes to go, and we are ahead in the game. We had a lot of opportunities when they missed their free throws, but we didn't get the rebounds. We were by far the best rebounding team in the SEC, and one of the best in the nation. If you look at the statistics of 'Snake' and Clyde, these guys rebounded like crazy. It was just one of those things that happened.

"The thing that always comes up about that game is what John Bibb (the late Tennessean sportswriter and later editor) put in the paper about that traveling call. He use to kid me about it and he'd say, 'Now John Ed, did you really walk?' I'd say, 'John, what can I say? They called it. It makes no difference.' John would write about it every three or five years. He would put it in the bottom of his "AYEM" column, he would say, 'Now I just want to ask you this, do you remember the John Ed Miller walk?'"

Lee recorded a game-high 28 points with 20 rebounds. Thomas added 21 points for VU, and Miller 17. Russell led Michigan with 26 points. Lee was named the Mid-East Regional's Most Valuable Player, with Thomas also joining the team.

Vanderbilt's 24-4 season ranks as one of the best in the school's history.

Michigan beat Bill Bradley's Princeton in the first round of the finals, but lost the championship game to UCLA, 91-80.

"We were 45 seconds away from the Final Four," said Miller. And had we made it

there, the team that won was UCLA. We always thought we would beat them. Our guard play would have been able to break the press better than Michigan, and that is what beat them. Michigan had Cazzie, and the other big guards who couldn't get the ball down the court. If you go back and look at that particular game, that's what killed them."

*Next week read about Vanderbilt's longtime track coach Herc Alley.*

**Traughber's Tidbit:** Vanderbilt lost to Georgetown 70-60 in the first round of the 1991 NCAA Tournament. The Commodores have made nine NCAA Tournament appearances in their basketball history. The victories over George Washington and Washington State in 2007, give the Commodores a 9-9 all-time record in tournament games. Best finishes include Elite Eight (1965: field of 23), Sweet Sixteen (1988, 1993: field of 64, 2004: field of 65).

*If you have any suggestions or comments you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail [WLTraughber@aol.com](mailto:WLTraughber@aol.com).*