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Interview no. 685

Richard W. Myers

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Richard W. Myers
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 22, 1983
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Student at Texas Western College and UTEP, 1965-68;
Member of the 1966 NCAA Basketball Championship team.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How he came to school in El Paso; Basketball season; the 1966
Championship team, games played, celebrations; Sports Illustrated
articles about black athletes; TWC-UTEP athletics in the mid-sixties.

Length of interview: 25 minutes Length of transcript: 14 pages

RICHARD W. MYERS
by Rebecca Craver
November 22, 1983

C: Why did you come to UTEP and when?

M: I came to UTEP in September 1965. The primary reason I came was because I came down on a basketball scholarship and as a junior majoring in Business Administration. My reasons were really two-fold. Number 1, I wanted to play basketball for a major college, which Texas Western at the time was. And number 2, to finish my college education in a larger university away from the small town environment I grew up in.

C: Where did you come from?

M: I came from Kansas. I was born and grew up in Kansas. I went to junior college for two years in Kansas, Hutchinson Junior College, with the hopes of being able to go on and go to a major four-year school and further my education and compete in basketball my final two years.

C: Did Don Haskins recruit you?

M: Well, it was a combination of Don Haskins and his assistant, Moe Iba. Moe Iba came up to Kansas and talked to me. And then I flew down here and met with both Don Haskins and Moe Iba, and spent the weekend, talked to some of the ball players, some of the other students, and looked around El Paso and the University.

C: Besides the people and wanting to play for a major college, what else enticed you to come here?

M: Basically, being from Kansas, a small town, I really wanted to get out in a way. I wanted to get away from the small town atmosphere and away from home, so to speak. And by coming down here, 800

miles away, I succeeded in that, along with the other things that I had mentioned earlier.

C: How many classes, what was your course load that first semester?

M: I took 18 hours. I took 18 hours each semester. I had to make up 10 hours on transfers of junior college hours. Like in junior college, I took 10 hours of English. You needed 12 here, so I had to take another three-hour course. So I lost a few hours in the transfer. My grades were fine, but I had to take some different courses to meet my requirement for graduation. I did have to drop three hours one semester and three hours another semester. One Economics course I had a professor who told me since I had missed fifty percent of the classes due to basketball trips the best grade he could give me was a "D". So even though I was carrying a "B" average at the time, I had to drop the course.

It was tough traveling. Basketball in particular is hard on student athletes because it covers two semesters.

C: What did you think about Don Haskins the man, and Don Haskins the coach?

M: I thought Don Haskins the coach was as good as any. I thought he was an excellent coach. He worked us very hard, but for a purpose. And I feel that he did what he thought he had to do to win, and I recognize that and I appreciate that. As a man, at first, well, I don't know whether it was things I'd heard or... He always treated me fairly, but we were not particularly close. I don't think he really, at that time, ever got particularly close to any of the kids that were playing for him at the time.

C: He had only been here about four or five years.

M: He had been here about five years I think. I think he came in '61.

I don't think he really got close to the athletes when they were playing for him. After I played and graduated a different relationship developed and I saw Coach Haskins in a different light. I think as far as a coach, he probably got more out of his players than anybody I've known, and went further with that material. While I was at UTEP we didn't have any super, super athletes, we just had a lot of good ball players. And he molded them into very good basketball teams.

C: What was your schedule as far as, you know, working out?

M: Well, we had to be down here like the 3rd of September and we would go work out unsupervised, just shooting with other team members from about the 3rd or 4th of September until practice started on October the 15th on regular schedules for three to three and half hours a day, sometimes two practices a day, seven days a week until the first game. So, obviously, we worked very hard at it. Once the season started, practices were just as intense but were shorter, particularly the day before games. After the season was over, there would be more unorganized shooting until the end of the semester.

X: Tell Becky about the New Year's Day workout.

M: Well, what Elsie's referring to is a party that one of the basketball players threw for New Year's Eve, and I went to that party and I had a little bit too much to drink that night. One thing led to another and we started challenging guys to contests and so forth, and I got pretty well gone that night. At practice the next day I absolutely felt like hell, and I think Haskins knew it because he ran me extra hard that day. And the guys were just giving me one heck of a hard time. They all knew that I was in big trouble. I think that's about

the worst practice I've ever been to in my life. But I don't know, it may not have been any harder than some of the other practices we had. We really worked at doing what we did and doing it well.

C: Well, tell me about the other members of the team. What do you remember about certain guys?

M: Want me to name them?

C: Sure.

M: Okay. Well, we had a varied group of guys from all over the United States that were here. David Lattin was here. He was from Houston. Tremendously talented basketball player. The year we won the National Championship he was a sophomore. He played one more year here and then he left school and turned Pro. He's now in Houston working with a liquor distributor. Bobby Joe Hill, who came from Detroit, still lives here in El Paso, works for El Paso Natural Gas Company. I don't think Bobby Joe was a great basketball player, but the year we won the NCAA championships in 1966, it just seemed like he was always at the right place at the right time. Bobby Joe wasn't a particularly great shooter, but he probably won three or four games with last second shots. He was a good ball handler, extremely quick. His shooting percentage probably wasn't that great that year. But he made things happen and he got the team running and playing together as a group.

Willie Worsley, who was a sophomore the year we won the championship, was only about 5'6" or 5'7" and could dunk the basketball. Everyone came early to see Willie dunk during pre-game warm-ups. He was from New York City. Willie Cager was from New York City, and was probably the best one on one player on the team. Harry Flournoy was from Indiana and probably the best "leader" on the team. Orsten

Artis was also from Indiana and was our best shooter. We also had Flip Boudoin, who was from Albuquerque, who along with Nevil Shed were the team "funny men", always good for a laugh. David Palacio from El Paso, Togo Railey from El Paso, and Jerry Armstrong from Missouri. Jerry Armstrong was just a typical farm boy. And so we had a mixture of guys from the big city, guys from the farm, myself from a small town in Kansas, a mixture of a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

[As] a team we stressed defense, team play, and we did very well at both of these. We led the nation in rebounding that year. Fundamentally we blocked out well, which was necessary in that we weren't particularly tall. As a group everyone got along pretty well. I don't remember any lasting friction on the team at all that year. There might have been a blowup here or there, there might have been a fight on the practice court, but it was soon forgotten once you showered and went home.

C: But you say nobody was really a great basketball player. Well, what made you successful then?

M: Well, we had no All-Americans. We had a team concept, we stressed defense, and we stressed rebounding. And those are the things that go into making a winning basketball team. You play good defense and you rebound well, you're going to win more than your share of basketball games. And in those two areas this particular team excelled.

C: Now, let's talk about that '65-'66 season and that NCAA tournament. Where was the tournament held?

M: The tournament was held in College Park, Maryland, at the University

of Maryland. Let me lead up to it, let me kind of walk you through the whole season.

C: All right.

M: We were really not a basketball power. We were a team that had beaten some good teams in the past but we really weren't a basketball power. We were not nationally ranked prior to the season. We started out the season and played a lot of teams that we could beat rather easily. We played Eastern New Mexico and some teams like that that we beat easily. Then we played in the Sun Bowl Carnival and we played Iowa in the first game. Iowa was ranked fifth or sixth in the nation. We blew them off the floor, beat them very easily, went on to win that tournament. From that point on, we were then nationally ranked.

We continued throughout the year. We played some tough games. We played New Mexico, we played Arizona State--a lot of other schools that are now in the WAC. We were not in the WAC at that time. We played Seattle twice. We played the last game in the regular season at Seattle, and they beat us by one or two points in a game that really could have gone either way and we probably should have won, but we let it slip away at the end. There were a lot of questionable calls in it, of course I may be a little biased, but we let it slip away and we lost. And everybody was pretty down after that but we pulled together, came back together, and then we started in the NCAA playoffs.

The first playoff game was in Wichita, Kansas. We played Oklahoma City, a team that was known for their high scoring. They got ahead of us something like 20 to 4. Coach Haskins did not start Bobby Joe Hill that night. After our first loss in Seattle the team

was a little down and everybody kind of went their own way and some of the players didn't make curfew that night. Bobby Joe was one and he did not start the game against Oklahoma City. I can remember in the locker room before the game, all the guys saying, "Forget Coach Haskins, we'll win this one for ourselves," and all this and all that. And so we pulled together. Bobby Joe starts off on the bench. We get down 20 to 4 or something like that, Coach Haskins puts him in the game, we come back. We went on to win it by 20 or 25 points easily. So here's another example of how he comes in and sparks us.

From there, we went to Lubbock the next weekend. Back then we played back to back games on Friday and Saturday. We didn't have a day off like they do now. In the first game we played Cincinnati and it took us an overtime to beat them, and it was a very, very tough game. They had a very good team from the Missouri Valley Conference, which was a strong basketball conference back then.

The next night for the championship of the Regionals we played the University of Kansas, again a very strong team. They had won the Big 8 Conference. They had Jo Jo White, Walt Wesley, some other ball players that went on to play in the Pros. It was a very close game all the way. We led most of the way and then they tied it right at the end of regulation. Just before the end of the first overtime it was tied and Kansas got the ball. Jo Jo White went downcourt and made a shot from the corner but he had stepped out of bounds just before shooting so the basket did not count. In Texas Western/UTEP basketball history this probably rates as the most exciting game ever played. So it was another overtime, the second overtime. We finally won it in the second overtime. From there we went to

College Park, Maryland, University of Maryland.

Of course by then the whole town was just crazy. The whole year long, I can remember they would open up Memorial Gym and they'd show the live game on a screen set up in the auxiliary gym in Memorial. Because Memorial Gymnasium only held 5,200 people, the games were all sold out. They also would replay the games at 10:30 at night. We had so many close ball games that we won by one or two points. We came from 20 points behind to beat New Mexico. Bobby Joe sank a long shot against Colorado State to beat them by one point. We had four or five ball games that we won in the last few seconds that we really...cliff hanger time the whole year.

But anyway, we went on to College Park for the "Final Four." First game we played the University of Utah, who had won the Western Athletic Conference. They had a player by the name of Jerry Chambers who was just a super scorer. He ended up scoring something like 41 points against us, more points than anybody had ever scored against us. Jerry Armstrong came off the bench in the last half and finally slowed him down a little bit and we went on and beat them by nine or ten points. The other two teams in the "Final Four" were Kentucky and Duke. The Kentucky and Duke game had been billed as the National Championship game, because really nobody--even though we were rated number 2 or number 3 in the nation at that time, Kentucky was [number] 1--gave us a chance of winning. They felt that the winner of the Kentucky-Duke game would go on and beat us then the next night. Kentucky and Duke played a good tough game and Kentucky ended up winning.

So then it turned out to be the all-white Kentucky team against the all-black starting team from Texas Western. That was the way it was played up in the press at the time. However, as far as the team goes, that really was never a factor, from my standpoint. I really do not ever remember the white and black being even a topic of discussion. We really didn't. Coach Haskins was playing who he thought were the best five, six or seven ball players, and the fact that they happened to be black was, that's the way it was. And the other five ball players on the team...I particularly, I understood it that way, and we really never had any frictions along that line and I really don't remember it ever being discussed that much here in El Paso. But that doesn't mean it wasn't discussed that way in the South or the Southeast or wherever. Obviously it was in Kentucky.

So in the Championship game we played Kentucky. It was a close ball game the first 10 or 12 minutes. Then Bobby Joe stole the ball twice in a row from Louie Dampier for Kentucky and put us up about six or seven points. From that point on, we maintained a four to five, six point lead. And the secret in the ball game was, going back to our strong points, was our defense and our rebounding, and we took Kentucky out of their game. Kentucky was a great shooting team, but they were not able to get the same kind of shots that they got against everybody else. As a result, when they didn't get the easy shots or they had a hand in their face all night long, they didn't make the same shots that they normally made.

So as a result we won the championship 72 to 65 and were the 1966 NCAA champs. And particularly for me, a year ago playing in a junior college, it was just kind of an unbelievable dream really, and it was

one heck of a lot of fun. I really enjoyed that year, I had a great time, even though I didn't get to play all that much. I certainly will never forget it. It was certainly one of the highlights of my life.

C: What was the city's reaction when you all came back?

M: City's reaction, my only regret is that I wasn't here to help celebrate that night. But I've talked to a lot of friends, and everybody stayed up all night. What the players did is, it was on Saturday night we played, and we got on a plane to come back here at like 7 o'clock in the morning Eastern time. So we just stayed up all night and we had a big steak about 6 inches thick, and they had a party for us over at the hotel where we were staying. The Texas Western Band was up there and the cheerleaders, so we all got together and just had a good time until about seven in the morning, got on the plane and came back. It was a charter flight and coming back in, they had a camera set up to where you could see all the people in the ground. There were about ten to twelve thousand people here waiting for us when we got [back].

C: Out there at the airport?

M: Out at the airport, and it's just something that I don't think El Paso had ever seen before--and hasn't seen since. It was the way that they responded to that team. When we got off the plane they had a platform that they'd built for us. We all got up on the platform, we all gave a little speech and a thank you for everything. And we had the trophies up there. Then we signed autographs for about an hour, it seemed like. Then they put us in Model-T type cars, old cars, and drove us back downtown--course the interstate didn't even exist back then--back down Montana, and we had a parade. There were

people lined down the streets all the way, all the way back to the campus. We got off in front of Burges Hall, and then we must have spent another two hours just signing autographs there. I think it was about 4 or 5 o'clock when I finally got inside and relaxed a little bit. But it was really a great experience.

C: And then the team was featured in Sports Illustrated. When was that?

M: You're referring to, "The Black Athlete?"

C: Yeah.

M: That came about '68, I believe. I think it was after I had graduated. It was very disappointing to me because I could see it as a lot of partial truths and half truths and things that I really didn't feel were true at all, and I think a lot of things were blown out of proportion. I think it was kind of like the sensationalism-type journalism to where they felt that they could sell a lot of magazine articles. I think it really hurt the school bad.

C: What did you object to the most?

M: Some of the guys that were quoted in that stating that there were preferential treatment given to whites over blacks or to certain people over other people, and I flatly never saw that. I just did not see that at all. I felt that everybody was treated pretty well the same. Be that good, bad or indifferent, I thought everybody was pretty well treated the same. And I felt that it was unfair to the overall program of UTEP basketball, football, and other things. Now, there might have been a few isolated cases like that, but you can't tell me there weren't a few isolated cases like that in every school, and not necessarily due to racism or anything else. Just that's the way athletes are, athletics are. If you get a guy that's

not pulling his weight, so to speak, you know, there may be wanting to bring somebody else to take his place. That's going to happen everywhere to a certain degree. I don't feel that it was happening here anymore than anywhere else, and I don't feel that it was all that negative, what was happening. I haven't read those articles in years. I think I saved them all, but I haven't had them out to read them. But I just didn't feel it was fair.

C: Did you live in Miners Hall?

M: I lived in Burges Hall. I ate all my meals in Miners Hall. The football players lived in Miners Hall and all athletes ate at Miners Hall. I thought the food was good. I thought the food was very good, as a matter of fact, for dorm-type living.

The basketball players lived on the bottom floor at Burges, and as a matter of fact I think it's still that way. I think a lot of them still live on the bottom floor down there. We had a togetherness. We'd get together, I'd get together with Worsley and Cager and we'd play cards. We'd just get together and play cards and watch T.V. together because we were teammates on the basketball team.

C: What about the next year? You played again, didn't you?

M: Yes, I was a junior in 1966. I played the next year as a senior. During the Summer I got married and moved out of the dorm into an apartment, so I was a little more separated from the team as such just due to the fact that I wasn't living with them all the time. We lost Orsten Artis, Harry Flournoy, and Jerry Armstrong off the championship team. And we ended up 22 and 6 that year, so we still had a very good year. We got beat in the Regionals. Bobby Joe Hill hurt an ankle at about halfway through the year and never really

came back from that, so we lost Bobby Joe actually for the last half of the year. And Nevil Shed, who is somebody I didn't mention earlier, was not eligible for post season play.

So we lost actually five ball players off the team, and we still went into the Regionals with a 22 and 6 record. We got knocked off the Regionals by the University of Pacific the night before we were to play UCLA. We were caught looking ahead to UCLA and didn't play well against Pacific. That happened to be Lew Alcindor's first year. So we were looking forward to playing him and it didn't happen, which was to the regret of all of us that we did not get to play them. I'm not saying we would have beat them, and there's probably a good chance we would not have beaten them. But you know, we wanted a shot at them, being defending champions.

But I thought we had a good year that year. Again, we were still an independent. Texas Western had not affiliated itself with any conference at that time. '65-'66 was the last year it was Texas Western. I believe it went to UTEP in '66 - '67, so I had one year as Texas Western and one year as UTEP.

C: Do you remember any talk about the name change?

M: Very little, as a matter of fact. I got a letter that Summer, I think there had been a little talk before I went home in the Summer. Coach Iba wrote a letter that Summer, or Coach Haskins, and it indicated that we were going through a university name change and that we would therefore here forward be known as the University of Texas at El Paso. And that's really how I got official word of it, was that during the Summer when I went back to Hutchinson, Kansas in the Summer to work.

But I feel very fortunate to have participated at Texas Western

and UTEP at that time. I feel that it was probably the peak of athletic prowess at the University. We had of course the NCAA championship basketball team, and then we had good basketball teams for two or three or four years after that. We've always had pretty good basketball teams. The football team in '65 went to the Sun Bowl and beat Texas Christian University, and in '67 went to the Sun Bowl again and beat the University of Mississippi. And since then of course the football program has fallen on hard times.

So I feel that I was a part of probably the best time to have been at Texas Western and UTEP, from an athletic standpoint. I feel the University has probably made great strides from the academic standpoint since then, but I feel very fortunate to have been a part of it and it was good to me. And obviously I've liked El Paso and stayed here in El Paso every since we came down here, so we've made it a home. And we take the whole family to all the basketball games, most of the football games.

C: I think on that note we'll stop.