

PHOTO FINISH

In six decades of shooting the Final Four, Rich Clarkson has shaped how we see the game



BY BRIAN HENDRICKSON

The dim basement resembles a library archive, not the sublevel of a home in suburban Denver. Nondescript bankers' boxes – 125 of them, each labeled in black marker – sit heavy on bookshelves circling a concrete floor. One reads “1972 Munich;” next to it, another is marked “1968 Mexico City.” On more shelves along nearby walls, stacks of old copies of the Topeka (Kansas) Capital-Journal and the Los Angeles Times rise in meticulous columns. A light table, once an essential tool for photographers, rests in the middle of the room surrounded by retired camera cases, a 30-year-old Macintosh and a generous magazine archive.

Rich Clarkson buries his hands in one of those boxes, sifting through the hundreds of photographs inside, searching for memories. He could reach into any one of these boxes and pull out a spellbinding shot: politicians, auto accidents, carnage from a tornado.

He draws out a photo of Stan Musial, close to retirement, hunched over and alone on the

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The scope of Rich Clarkson's career can be seen in the display of media credentials he keeps in his home office in Denver. JAMIE SCHWABEROW / NCAA PHOTOS



Access was the key to Clarkson's success. Coaches who carefully measured the media's access, including Bob Knight and Dean Smith, opened their doors to the photojournalist, who showed respect toward his subjects while still capturing photographs of significance. It started during his college days, when Clarkson (third from the right, wearing glasses) would travel and eat team meals with Phog Allen's Jayhawks.

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St. Louis Cardinals bench. Next, he draws out a sequence of photos from the 1972 Munich Olympics: A Russian basketball player holding his arms up triumphantly, followed by three American players. One looks like his stomach is trying to wring out its contents. Another is angry. The last looks to be in deep shock. The U.S. had just lost the Olympic gold-medal game, in controversial style, to the Russians.

They're the types of images for which Clarkson is best remembered – moments that reflect a deeper humanity that influenced the way people look at sports. Clarkson focused not just on the action, but also on the defining moments that came before the big games and after the big shots. He developed a signature low-angle style shot from a camera placed just off the baseline and pioneered the mounting of cameras behind backboards and above locker rooms to capture unique perspectives. College sports was his preferred canvas for capturing those innovative illustrations of significant moments. It took him to dozens of Final Fours, where he captured some of the most memorable and reproduced images from the tournament: University of Kansas basketball coach Phog Allen giving his Jayhawks a pep talk at halftime; UCLA center Lew Alcindor pulling down a rebound over the University of Houston's Elvin Hayes; North Carolina State University coach Jim Valvano, dazed from a historic upset of Houston, being hoisted onto the shoulders of his players and fans.

Even at 82, Clarkson still has an appetite for capturing those moments of humanity that allow sport to speak to people. That hunger will take him back to the baseline this spring, his 60th trip to the Final Four. But this time, Clarkson expects, he will close a chapter of his life.

This Final Four, he expects, will be his last.



The tunnels were a perfect playground for Clarkson and his boyhood pals, who played games as they snuck through the University of Kansas' heating system, guessing which doors led to which buildings. With only one security guard to dodge, the boys were free to explore, and in time they became familiar enough with the labyrinth to find their way into Robinson Gymnasium, a Gothic-style building with room for 2,500 spectators. The Kansas Jayhawks practiced there.

One day in 1939, the boys snuck in to find the team in the middle of a workout, so they took a seat along a wall and watched coach Phog Allen instruct his team. When the coach spotted the boys during a water break, he introduced them to another guest at his practice. "Boys, why don't you meet the other gentleman who's watching the game?" Clarkson recalls Allen saying to them. Then he introduced them to his old coach, the man who created the game: James Naismith.

Clarkson had yet to publish his first article or snap his first photograph – but the introduction proved a perfect stage-setter for the boy who would go on to cover eight of every 10 Final Fours ever played.

Clarkson grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, and lived above one of its top restaurants, the Colonial Tea Room. It was owned by his grandmother, Fannie Murphy, who presided over its kitchen while his mother, Mary Clarkson, worked as the hostess and oversaw the

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STORIES FROM RICH CLARKSON AS TOLD TO BRIAN HENDRICKSON

Phog, in a fog

The famous Phog Allen from Kansas is the most remarkable person I ever met. But he was the ultimate absent-minded professor. He would forget all kinds of things, and yet it was part of his charm. I was traveling with the team in his last years, and it was so much fun. You never knew what was going to happen next.

They kept giving him, at testimonial dinners, new cars. And then he would forget where he parked the car. He got back from a trip to Kansas City, and Bess, his wife, said, "Forrest, where's the car?"

He said, "Isn't it in the driveway?"

"Well, no, you drove the car to Kansas City."

Then he says, "I guess I did take the interurban back, so the car is still in Kansas City." So someone has to go get the car.

They gave him a new car one time, and the day after they gave him the car, he's driving it home. He's driving his new car, his new testimonial car, and Bess is standing in the front yard and waving at him. He's waving back as he drives right down the driveway, wiping out the ladder on which the two painters were painting the side of the house. Painters and paint and ladders and everything are falling all over everywhere.

Clarkson's earliest locker-room access came with Phog Allen's Kansas Jayhawks. The freshman roomed with future coach Dean Smith (fifth from the left) while covering the team's road games.



Sparky Stalcup erupts into a firestorm

Missouri coach Sparky Stalcup put on one of the greatest displays of a coach losing it that I've ever seen in the old Brewer Fieldhouse – leaping up onto the floor and throwing towels and running up and down the sidelines. I'm busy shooting pictures of the whole thing. I made about eight or 10 of those and sent them off to the Kansas City Star.

A day later, my mother says, "The phone call is for you." It was Coach Stalcup. He said, "I want you to know that you're never welcome again in Brewer Fieldhouse." So I called the sports editor of the Kansas City Star to report on the phone call I got about these pictures. They then wrote a column about it. And then the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote an article about it. And the guy who was the sports editor at the Columbia Daily Tribune wrote one, all very critical of Sparky Stalcup, of treating an aspiring college photographer like that.

Later that year I'm getting ready to follow the Kansas basketball team to Seattle for the championships, and they were on a commercial flight. They were one seat short on the connection out of Minneapolis, so they put me on another flight that was leaving 30 minutes later. So I'm getting there just as they're getting ready to close the door on this flight, and just before they rolled the stairway away the stewardess at the top of the stairway says, "There's only one seat left." And the one seat that was empty and vacant was right next to Sparky Stalcup.

He says, "You're Clarkson, aren't you?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "We'll have to make the best of this, won't we?"



Missouri coach Sparky Stalcup was criticized for banning Clarkson from Brewer Fieldhouse for photographing this tirade – an altercation that ended in an awkward airline flight.



While Clarkson's career took him from leadership positions in Topeka, Kansas, all the way to National Geographic, his search for significant moments always brought him back to cover sports events like the Final Four.

SUBMITTED BY RICH CLARKSON

dining room. The restaurant drew Kansas professors, local politicians and businessmen, exposing the young Clarkson to those intellectuals daily. The area's most successful minds taught him about the world, politics, business and education.

So at age 12, Clarkson started his own business – an aeronautics newspaper called Aero Science. He wrote to known names in the industry to solicit submissions: Eddie Rickenbacker and heralded British aeronautics writer Peter Masefield, among others. He printed the biweekly newspapers – which grew as large as 18 pages and reached a peak circulation of 75 – on a county school superintendent's mimeograph. For three years he sold the ads, wrote the articles and managed his staff of three friends.

The job at times provided compelling material. The head of aeronautical engineering at Kansas was among his best sources, even inviting Clarkson to interview a man whose biography the aspiring journalist had just finished.

"He was in Lawrence?" his surprised father, Maurice Clarkson, asked over dinner that night. "Did you get his autograph?"

Clarkson replied gruffly. "Journalists don't ask for autographs," he said.

Clarkson continues the story, dropping the kicker with Paul Harvey precision. "And that's why I don't have Orville Wright's autograph."

By his senior year in high school, Clarkson was covering Jayhawks basketball games and selling his photos to newspapers in Topeka and Kansas City for \$7.50 apiece. He began traveling with the Jayhawks and filing game stories from the road for the Lawrence Journal-World while rooming several nights a year with a young, scholarly guard named Dean Smith. When Clarkson was a freshman at Kansas, he followed the Jayhawks – home and away – as Clyde Lovellette, the nation's leading scorer, guided Kansas to its first NCAA tournament title.

Clarkson was still in college when Maurice Clarkson pointed out that his son was earning more money than he was.

And at that point, his son had spent all those earnings on new cameras and equipment.



Clarkson's stories can make him sound like a photojournalist version of Forrest Gump, hopscotching through the 20th century with career milestones that mesh with the big moments of history. He covered a murder trial with young author Truman Capote, who was documenting the proceedings for his upcoming true-crime thriller, "In Cold Blood," a book credited with giving birth to the narrative non-fiction genre. Joining Capote to assist with research was his childhood friend who had just published her first book, "To Kill a Mockingbird." Harper Lee told Clarkson the book was selling pretty well. Clarkson once had dinner with former President Harry Truman and listened to his colorful opinions of Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill. On assignment, he photographed President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Medicare bill.

No, his life wasn't always about sports. But sports never left his life. In 1981, he turned down a position at Sports Illustrated in order

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How to photograph a giant of a man

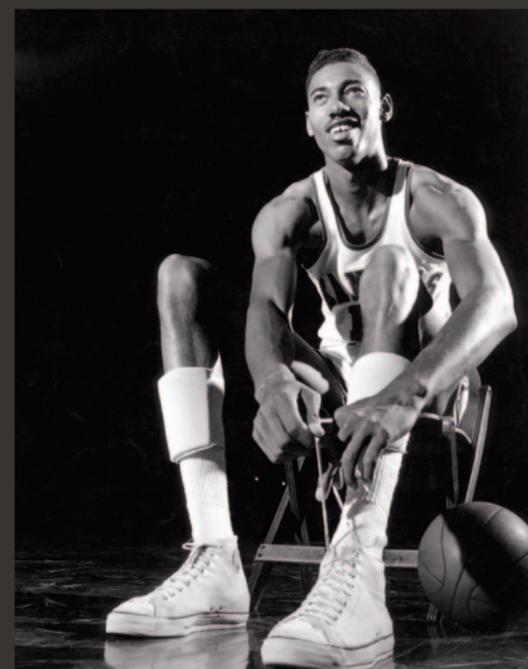
Wilt Chamberlain was the hottest recruit in America. I mean everyone was recruiting him. He was 7-1, and a great high school player from Philadelphia. And no one in the world could figure out why a Philadelphia kid, with all the great basketball powers on the East Coast, would come to Kansas.

So at that point I thought, OK, that's one of the better stories going, so I need to concentrate on him. So that first day when he was a freshman, at the start of the season, they have a picture day in which all the players are there and they take the group picture, and members of the press can come in and take portraits or posed action or whatever. And on that occasion I had Wilt.

I had pictures of him dunking, and pictures of him passing the ball. I set up the strobes so it was all dramatically lighted and looks pretty good. If you're 7-feet tall, yeah, it's interesting, the pictures of him dunking the ball. It was a good picture. But I kept thinking, what else could I do that would show his height?

Well, between changing the lights and setting some things up, he sat down in the chair and was tying his shoes. I looked over and I said, "That's it!" So I said, "Let me take the chair and put it over here. Now you can go back to retying your shoes." It looks like a posed picture, but he was actually tying his shoes. I got three or four frames off of him doing exactly that. And that's the picture with the high knees and his very high waist, sitting in a low folding chair. That's the picture that gives you a picture of how really tall he was.

That picture is one of the signature pictures of my career. It's been reprinted over and over and over. Wilt even liked it.



Clarkson took one of the most recognizable photographs of his career when he was still in college. He selected this low angle in 1955 to illustrate the height of 7-foot-1 Kansas center Wilt Chamberlain, a freshman, who drew national attention before playing a single game.



'Thanks for everything'

Sports involves drama, and so much of it. Every now and then over my career, I've done a picture and I knew right then that it was the picture. Lots of other times, you discover it in the film or the digital files later.

Sidney Wicks thanking John Wooden for his career at the end of the championship game is one of those. John had taken him out of the game with about two minutes to go so all of the fans would cheer for him at that great moment – the individual cheer, in addition to the team cheer. That was really interesting because Sidney and Coach Wooden had had a somewhat rocky relationship for all of those years.

For him to go over, and I didn't know what he was saying at the time, but I knew it was a special moment. I just knew that. Then I found out later what Sidney was saying to him, which was, "Coach, you're something else. Thanks for everything."

It was the significance of the photo that made it a great shot. John told me, and told a number of people over the years, that it was his favorite photograph of his entire career at UCLA.

John Wooden (right) and Sidney Wicks had a tense relationship at UCLA. But Wooden told Clarkson this photo of Wicks shaking his hand while exiting the 1971 national championship game was the coach's favorite photograph of his career.

Documenting – and preserving – NCAA history

I'd been photographing the basketball tournament for several years and then the Division I track meet, the College World Series in Omaha, and a lot of the other championships just by happenstance.

So at that point, talking with – I don't know if it was Walter Byers or one of the succeeding executive directors – I suggested that there's an opportunity here to actually photograph all of your championships for a great archive, and I think I could figure out a way to make the finances work on something like that, and we could just call it NCAA Photos. It was one of those things that, I'd been around so much that before even discussing either the logistics or the money, they just agreed.

For archives, they would be getting stuff that other newspaper photographers had been doing. And they would get prints, put the prints in an archive. I was aware of what they had, and they were getting ready to move to Indianapolis from their Kansas City headquarters, and I'm over there and the archive they had was basically prints. It was two or three file drawers full of prints. They were literally getting ready to throw all that stuff out as part of the move.

I found them in the office as they were putting these things in boxes, and I said, "You're throwing them out? Can I have them?" So I carried all those boxes out to the trunk of my car and brought them to our offices. We've still got all that stuff today. We have the only complete archive of the NCAA of all of those years, up to right now.

So now there is a digital archive, which the NCAA has access to. But if I hadn't recognized all that stuff, it would've been thrown out.



His 59 shining moments

Basketball is so unique in that, unlike football or some other sports, nobody is hidden behind shoulder pads or helmets. You get to see and experience the emotions of the game. You see it on people's faces. You see it in their body language. You get all this in addition to the beauty of great athletic prowess and beautiful plays. You see the human element of it as well. To me, it makes basketball the most interesting of all the sports.

In sports, there is stress, there's excellence, there's unpredictability. You can see it in sports; it's there to witness and to understand and to appreciate. In politics or in war, some of the significant things that are happening are not necessarily visual. They're not photographic. You can make a great photograph that doesn't echo the real turning point in whatever the battle may be.

The emotion is out there in sports. You're prepared for it with the technology of the camera that's going to capture it. You're prepared for it, but the most important thing is you recognize what is going on and what is significant.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there's not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I've photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and they're looking up to the heavens with almost an angelic expression on their face. There are other times you see in their faces the severe disappointment of coming so close.

A great athletic moment is beautiful: a great play, the great achievement. The 7-foot high jump. The 19-foot pole vault. The trophy at the Rose Bowl. There are all those great moments. But the most insightful thing, I think, is on the face of winners and losers.



Clarkson made his name capturing the emotions of championship moments, such as UConn celebrating the 1999 national championship (top), and unusual perspectives shot from unique angles.

to lead the photo staff at the Denver Post, but the magazine kept him on as a freelancer. When National Geographic lured him away from the Post to lead its legendary photo department, it allowed him to continue his contract with the sports magazine. And when he left National Geographic to lead the development of his friend Brian Lanker's project to photograph impactful African-American women – "I Dream a World," one of the most successful coffee table books of all time – Clarkson still spent his weekends photographing college sports.

In 1989, when Clarkson established his own business, one of Clarkson Creative's first clients was the NCAA. That relationship gave birth to NCAA Photos, which now photographs all 89 NCAA championships.

The games provided something other worldly events couldn't match. You can see it in the faces of the people he featured: the determination and boyish looks of Indiana swimmer Mark Spitz; the respect UCLA forward Sidney Wicks showed as he shook the hand of coach John Wooden, with whom he'd had a tense relationship, as he exited the 1971 national championship game; the elation from the celebrating University of Connecticut bench as it raced onto the court – leaping, screaming, pumping fists – after clinching its first men's basketball title in 1999.

A career in photojournalism is an unquenchable search for real and definitive moments. College sports provided Clarkson with those tears and cheers as naturally as dribbles and whistles. There he found raw emotion exposed where no political spin or bureaucracy could provide cover.



As he searches through the boxes in his basement, Clarkson comes to a thin, rectangular cardboard case sitting on a bookshelf. Its label: "First portfolio." He pulls out the container with nostalgic interest. The box looks as if it had sat undisturbed for years, if not decades.

"This is all early stuff," he says about the scrapbook inside, "when I was in high school and college."

One of the first photographs is of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. Another is a portrait of a young basketball player in a Kansas jersey, sitting on a folding chair, looking upward and smiling broadly as he ties his left shoe, knees projecting from the photo as if the shot were three-dimensional.

"Chamberlain," he says. "I wouldn't say it was a great picture." He sold the silver and gray picture to Sports Illustrated in 1955. It remains the iconic image of Wilt Chamberlain's college career.

The portfolio is carefully organized, each photo prudently attached, by a young man intent on making a strong impression to start his career – one that ultimately followed a path his wildest dreams couldn't have predicted.

"I never showed it to anyone," Clarkson says. "I never had to show a portfolio to get a job." **A**



At 82, Clarkson owns a library of iconic work from a career that will include a 60th trip to the Final Four this spring. Many of those photographs are stored in the 125 bankers' boxes stacked on shelves in the basement of his home. But despite his established legacy, he is still energized by a search for photographs of significance.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW / NCAA PHOTOS