Photo Finish

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

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

Continued on page 48
Champ | Winter 2015

Champions: 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, he was part of his charm. How he traveled 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 Boss, his wife, said, “Fernie, where’s the car?”
He said, “I’m not in the driveway.”
“Well, no, you drove the car to Kansas City.”
Then he says, “Yeah, I did. I did like the service back, so the car’s still in Kansas City.” So someone has to go get the car.

Clarkson expected that he would take one 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 Boss is standing in the front yard and waving at him. He’s seen the picture in the newspaper of the two painters painting the side of the house. Painters and paint and lad- ders and everything are sitting 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.

Missouri coach Sparky Stalcup was criticized for banning Clarkson from Brewer Fieldhouse for photographing this tirade—an altercation that ended in an unscheduled walkout.

Missouri coach Sparky Stalcup erupted into a firestorm
Missouri coach Sparky Stalcup put on one of the greatest displays of a temper I’ve ever seen inside the old Brewer Fieldhouse—jump- ing 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 shots and went out 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 a note, at 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 champi- onships, 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 roll the slide away they see me standing there. Now we’re going into the stewardess at the top of the stairs, 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?”

Continued on page 50
When Wilt Chamberlain was the hottest recruit in America, I mean everyone was recruiting him. He was 7-4, and a great high school player from Philadelphia. And no one in the world could figure out why Philadelphia had not, with all the great basketball powers on the East Coast, would come to Kansas.

And at that point I thought, Oh, 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 in 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, and jumping. And he was 7-foot-tall, and looks pretty good. If you’ve 7-foot tall, yeah, it’s interesting, the pictures of him dunking the ball. It was a great angle. I was going to start up that path, and I thought, ‘What on earth would he do with his hands?’

Well, between changing the lights and setting some things up, Wilt’s sitting 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 pull it over here. You can lean back and we’ll get 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. Will even liked it.

John Woods (right) and Sidney Wicks had a tense relationship. So at that moment Sidney realized the.,

Sidney Wicks shaking hands. 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 a somewhat rocky relationship for all of those years.

Sidney and John Wooden had a tense relationship. That was the moment when Sidney realized the championship game was the coach's favorite photograph of his career. 
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 all at once. Some 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 necessary as 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.

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.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there is just one emotion, but a mixture of emotions on the face of an athlete. You photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and there’s not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I’ve learned that being present and prepared is one of the most important things.

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 all at once. Some 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 necessary as 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.

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.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there is just one emotion, but a mixture of emotions on the face of an athlete. You photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and there’s not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I’ve learned that being present and prepared is one of the most important things.

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 all at once. Some 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 necessary as 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.

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.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there is just one emotion, but a mixture of emotions on the face of an athlete. You photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and there’s not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I’ve learned that being present and prepared is one of the most important things.

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 all at once. Some 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 necessary as 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.

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.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there is just one emotion, but a mixture of emotions on the face of an athlete. You photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and there’s not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I’ve learned that being present and prepared is one of the most important things.

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 all at once. Some 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 necessary as 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.

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.

Looking at the moment right after the competition is over, in so many instances, there is just one emotion, but a mixture of emotions on the face of an athlete. You photographed athletes after having won something in which their eyes are closed and there’s not just one emotion but a mixture of emotions in the face of an athlete. I’ve learned that being present and prepared is one of the most important things.