

★ ★ THE MIGHTY ★ ★  
**GENERALS**

A STORY OF BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS AND  
RACIAL UNITY IN THE DEEP SOUTH.



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## **Columbia, South Carolina**

**March 7, 1971**

It was close to 1 a.m., and the Wade Hampton Generals boys basketball team had bed down for the evening at the Golden Eagle Motor Inn on the corner of Main and Elmwood Streets in downtown Columbia, South Carolina. A couple of hours earlier and a few blocks away, the team had captured its second consecutive state 4A high school basketball championship. Shortly before midnight, the Generals defeated a powerful Dreher High School team that featured future Basketball Hall of Famer Alexander English.

The boys were crammed four to a room, two per double bed. They were given clear instructions by Head Coach Johnny Ross not to leave their rooms and to meet first thing in the morning for a pancake breakfast at the Motor Inn's restaurant. After breakfast, they would board the school's activity bus for their triumphant 100-mile Sunday morning ride back to their hometown of Greenville.

Sleep, however, was not on the boys' agenda, and who could blame them? They were euphoric, riding a wave of teenage adrenaline fueled by the act of cutting down the nets after their second consecutive state basketball championship.

Less than two years earlier, some of the players on the Wade Hampton team didn't know one another. They grew up in different sections of town, attended different schools and played for different teams. With the impetus provided by the federal government, they would become the first team in the school's history to include both white and black players.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Brown versus Board of Education* case that dual school systems for white and blacks were unconstitutional. Sixteen years after *Brown versus Board of Education*, federal government officials had reached the end of their patience with the lack of progress shown by the Greenville County School District's implementation of school desegregation. County school administrators were emphatically told that they would integrate their public schools, and they would do it immediately; otherwise, they would lose all federal funding. On February 17, 1970, approximately 12,000 of Greenville County's 57,000 students were reassigned to ensure an 80-20 white to black mix in all schools, a ratio intended to mirror that of the general population of Greenville County.

At the time of the mandated integration, the 1969-70 Wade Hampton boys basketball team was two-thirds of the way through its season and had posted a modest record of 11 wins and seven losses. They were facing an uphill battle to earn a spot in the Class 4A playoffs.

School integration closed the county's five black high schools, which led to the addition of several talented black athletes to Wade Hampton's roster, including 6'7" 225-pound Clyde Mayes, who had been a dominant player at the all-black Beck High School. Once Mayes joined the Generals, Wade Hampton would go on to win 33 of its next 35 games and capture back-to-back state championships while becoming one of the most dominant high school basketball teams ever produced in South Carolina.

The Generals basketball team was comprised of good kids, not prone to destructive mischief. Coach Ross had frequently and publically praised them for their character, leadership and discipline—but on this evening—in a rare act of disobedience, a handful of them would ignore their coach's orders. The four walls of the rooms at the Golden Eagle Motor Inn could not contain the exuberance of these teenage boys.

Team Co-Captain Norman McDonald recalled over four decades later: "We just were so excited and happy that we didn't want to go to bed, so we snuck out of our rooms and just started walking through the streets of Columbia. We weren't going anywhere or looking for any trouble, and we didn't have any money. We were just happy to have won our second state championship and didn't want the night to end."

Their journey had begun like many successful teams, with an odd convergence of lives: coaches and young boys from different walks of life brought together in an uncertain and turbulent post-integration civil rights era. United in a singular purpose, they put aside cultural and racial differences, and in the early morning hours of March 1971, on the deserted streets of the state capital, they celebrated with a late-night victory walk.

They walked as teammates. They walked as friends. This is their story.