

# SPORTS

## As player and coach

Latest appearance in state tourney was historic for former Letcher man

By BEN GISH

Chris Tolliver traveled from Morehead to Bowling Green earlier this month to add a new chapter to Letcher County's sports history.

When Tolliver walked onto the Diddle Arena floor on March to help coach Rowan County in the Girls' Sweet Sixteen, he became the first Letcher County male to both play and coach in a state high school basketball tournament. And he did it in just his first year of coaching.

Although the 16th Region champion Lady Vikings lost to 14th Region champion Breathitt County in the tourney's opening round, the accomplishment they — and Tolliver — were able to achieve just by getting to Bowling Green was remarkable given the turmoil the team faced at the beginning of the season.

Tolliver's journey from Whitesburg to Morehead and on to the Western Kentucky University gym in Bowling Green began in 2002, when he finished his playing days at Whitesburg High School after helping lead the Yellowjackets to the quarterfinals of the Sweet Sixteen. After graduating from Morehead State University in 2007, Tolliver was hired to teach social studies at Rowan County High, where he was also expected to assist former Lady Vikings head coach Troy Lee Thomas.

Tolliver's immediate future was soon left hanging in the air, however, when Thomas, also a Letcher County native, resigned before the 2007-08 season started for health reasons.

Tolliver picks up the story there: "I still decided I wanted to help, and coach John High was hired. He used to coach Whitesburg's girls in the '80s and '90s, taking them to several state tournaments.

"When I heard this I was very excited. I was going to get the experience of coaching under the winningest girls' basketball coach in the state. Conditioning and open gym started and things seemed to be going good. However, the day before our first scrimmage he resigned. The administration and him couldn't come to an agreement on some things. That left Scott Tackett, the assistant coach at the time, as the head coach and me as the assistant coach the day before our first scrimmage."

Tolliver helped coach the Lady Vikings to 27 wins this season against only six losses. Rowan County had a 16-0 mark while playing inside the 16th Region and, according to Bluegrass Preps, finished the year as the state's 18th best team.

Tolliver also served as head coach of Rowan County's junior varsity team, which finished the season with a 17-2 record and was also unbeaten in regional play.

"Not many coaches get such a great opportunity in their first year," said Tolliver. "I see that and I am grateful to get such a break."

Tolliver said coaching in a state championship tournament provided "a different side and perspective of basketball" than he saw as a player on a team led by future Transylvania University star Brian Howard. Tolliver's high school career ended on



Letcher County native Chris Tolliver helped the Rowan County Lady Vikings cut the nets after regional play.

March 15, 2002, when Whitesburg was defeated in Lexington's Rupp Arena by a North Hardin High School team led by future University of Kentucky star quarterback Andre Woodson.

"Stepping onto Rupp (Arena's floor) as a player is the pinnacle of any high school basketball player's career and is a feeling that can never be replaced," said Tolliver. "The excitement is unmatched. Knowing that it could be your last game ever and the last time you could play with your teammates weighs on you. You want to do everything perfect — make the right passes, take the right shots, play the best defense of your life."

"As a coach," Tolliver continued, "the emotions are a little different. The nervousness is still there but in a different way. You hope you can put your team in the best possible position to win. You are the one making the calls, not executing them. You are the one preparing the team, doing the research, watching the film, making the scouting reports. If you lose you feel like it is all your fault. You think maybe I should have done this or maybe we should of done that. It's all on your shoulders."

Tolliver said he decided on a career as a basketball coach while he was still in high school.

"I always knew that I wanted to coach, since I was in high school," he said. "I have played basketball my whole life and don't know what I would do without it. I was a student of the game for so long, and now I have the opportunity to share what I know and what I have learned with other players, both on and off the court."

Like most first-year coaches, Tolliver has no way of knowing what jobs lie ahead. One certainty, however, is that he hopes to continue to have a part in a winning basketball program.

"I don't know what my future holds, but I sure hope it involves more regional championships and even state championships," said Tolliver. "I have very high hopes for our team next year as well. We have three junior starters returning and some very promising sophomores and freshmen coming up. One of our juniors, Amber Riddle, was district and regional MVP. The other two were on both all-district and all-regional teams. I would expect us to have an equal if not more successful season next year. There is a very promising future for these girls."



IN EARLIER DAYS — Chris Tolliver, left, posed with fellow members of the Whitesburg Yellowjackets team that advanced to the quarterfinals of the Sweet 16 in 2002. Earlier this month, Tolliver helped guide the Rowan County Lady Vikings to a berth in the girls' Sweet 16 tourney at Bowling Green.

## Patterson gets 2nd chance with Reds

By JOE KAY  
AP Sports Writer

SARASOTA, Fla.

The spring games had already begun across Florida and Arizona. All Corey Patterson could do was work out on his own and wait.

Only 28 years old, the speedy center fielder found himself out of baseball at the start of March. He was working out at his home in Atlanta, looking for an offer to prolong his career in the majors.

He got the best one possible.

Manager Dusty Baker, who had watched him develop and then crash with the Chicago Cubs, wanted to bring him to the Cincinnati Reds. Baker has a hunch that Patterson is a late bloomer. He got a minor league contract on March 3 with a promise that he could compete for a job.

Patterson has been on the fast track ever since.

Once he got the rust off from his layoff, the former first-round draft pick has played himself into contention for the primary job in center field. Norris Hopper also is in the running, with Ryan Freel — who started in center last year — moving into a utility role.

With less than one week left before opening day, Patterson is batting .367.

"It's going like I thought it would," he said. "It takes you a good week, week and a half to get in the games and get the adrenaline flowing and get into baseball shape. No complaints."

Baker sure likes what he sees. "For a guy who came in late, he's looked very good, actually," Baker said. "He's worked on his bunting. He's always been a good outfielder. He's got a good arm. He's probably one of the fastest guys in baseball. I don't think most people know that."

Few know him as well as Baker.

Patterson was the third overall pick in the June 1998 draft, immediately earning the label of can't-miss outfielder. With his speed, the Cubs envisioned him leading off the lineup for years to come.

He played 59 games in the majors in 2001, then took over full-time the next season. He had a tantalizing season in 2003, when he batted .298 with 13 homers and 16 steals.

It seemed that he was just getting started. Two years later, af-



COREY PATTERSON (AP)

ter he batted .215 with five steals, he was gone from the Cubs and the National League. He played two years in Baltimore, batting .276 with 45 steals in 2006 and .269 with 37 steals last year.

Then, he was back home in Atlanta, looking for someone to give him another chance.

Baker, who managed him for three years in Chicago, felt he deserved one. Baker thinks that Patterson has a chance to finally blossom in Cincinnati.

"He's doing things we'd

hoped he would have done earlier than now, but everybody doesn't get it at the same time," Baker said. "He was in on-the-job training in the big leagues. That's difficult."

When Patterson got his contract, his teammates knew this was more than just another minor league signing. Freel figured it meant an end to his chances of playing in center.

"When they go out and get Corey Patterson, you can't help but think about what's going on," Freel said.

Patterson is getting the bulk of the time in center field as opening day approaches. He was in the lineup again Monday night against Toronto. Patterson knows his relationship with Baker has been a factor in getting him this chance.

"When you have a manager or a general manager who has seen you at your best in person, they really know what you can do," Patterson said. "I think that's a plus for anybody in that situation. I think that was a big part of it. I'm glad he's here. He had a pretty big influence on me getting over here, so I have a lot of respect for him."

## Gillispie optimistic after trying season

By WILL GRAVES  
AP Sports Writer

Billy Gillispie's first season at Kentucky ended in very un-Kentuckylike fashion.

What started with 23,000 fans in Rupp Arena for Big Blue Madness in October ended quietly in a generic gym on the West Coast with an uncharacteristically quick exit from the NCAA tournament.

Eighteen wins and a first-round loss to Marquette in Anaheim, Calif., on March 22 — Kentucky's first opening-round defeat in the tournament in 20 years — wasn't exactly what the nation's most passionate fanbase had in mind when the Wildcats lured Gillispie away from Texas A&M to replace Tubby Smith last spring.

Then again, dealing with injuries to three of his five best players and a battle of wills with one of his senior leaders isn't what Gillispie had in mind either.

Yet in the aftermath of Kentucky's 74-66 loss to Marquette last week, Gillispie was far from disappointed.

After leading the Wildcats (18-13, 12-4 Southeastern Conference) through the program's most trying season in two decades — one that saw them become a national punchline following losses to Gardner-Webb and San Diego, only to rally during SEC play — Gillispie knew

he had little to complain about.

"It was better than I expected, it was fantastic," Gillispie said. "I mean, as far as wins and losses go, no. I thought we would win more games. But if you would have said that you are going to have over 40 games missed by really, really, really, really good players, I would have said, 'How in the world are we going to make it in the tournament?'"

For a while, it looked like the Wildcats wouldn't, as the problems started seemingly moments after the cheers from the rousing pep rally called on the day of Gillispie's hiring faded.

Derrick Jasper had microfracture surgery on his left knee over the summer, missed 11 games and spent the rest of the season valiantly playing on one leg.

Jodie Meeks took an awkward fall in an exhibition game against Seattle, leading to a stress fracture in the pelvic region. Meeks tried to come back in late December but suffered a strained hip flexor that limited the team's best shooter to 11 games.

Do-everything freshman forward Patrick Patterson tried to carry the team on his back but went down with an ankle injury with two weeks left in the season.

Yet Gillispie's troubles weren't limited to the training room, as he and his players struggled to see eye-to-eye.

Freshman Alex Legion played sporadically for six games, then abruptly transferred to Illinois.

Senior guard Joe Crawford butted heads with Gillispie over his new coach's defense-oriented approach. Crawford spent the first few weeks of the year coming off the bench, as Gillispie repeated over and over that only those who gave consistent effort in practice would start.

Eventually the message got through, but not until some lightly regarded visitors became more than just tourists at one of college basketball's toughest venues.

Gardner-Webb dominated from the start to beat the Wildcats by 16 on Nov. 7. San Diego repeated the feat six weeks later, running away for an 81-72 victory on Dec. 29 that put Kentucky's streak of 16 straight NCAA tournament appearances in jeopardy.

A loss to rival Louisville a week later, a game in which the Wildcats were dominated in the second half, hardly gave any proof of the resurgence to come.

It started with a double-overtime win over then-undefeated Vanderbilt on Jan. 12. Ten days later Kentucky held off Tennessee, leading to a remarkable stretch run in which the Wildcats won 11 of their final 13 regular season games, including the last three wins without Patterson.

Yet rather than be devastated by Patterson's injury, his team-

mates responded with their most inspired play of the season, particularly forward Perry Stevenson.

Though matched up against markedly bigger opponents, Stevenson became a force in the middle, growing up in front of his coach's eyes.

There will be major holes to fill next year with the departure of seniors Crawford and Ramel Bradley, who combined for 33.8 points per game and took all the big shots down the stretch.

"They never ran from responsibility, they accepted it," Gillispie said. "Every single time something happened, and there were a lot of things happening ... all eyes from those players were focused on Joe and Ramel, and they saw strength."

It's a lesson Gillispie hopes filters down to players like Patterson, Jasper and Meeks. The Wildcats will need their leadership next season on a team that won't have a senior on it. Incoming recruits DeAndre Liggins and Darius Miller — who helped his Mason Co. (Ky.) team to the state championship over the weekend — should give the Wildcats some depth.

But after his tumultuous first season in which everything that could have gone wrong seemingly did, Gillispie isn't taking anything for granted. If this is as bad as it gets, he'll take it, and so will the fans.

## NASCAR season off to good start - mostly

Much to NASCAR's liking, the 2008 season is off to a great start thanks to five highly competitive races along with enough story lines on Monday morning to keep a fan's interest up until it's time to unload the haulers at the next stop on the schedule.



Steve Mickey

While some weather issues have caused several tracks to wave the green flags with a bunch of empty seats, TV ratings are the highest they have been in several years and when looking for a reason, all you have to do is look at some of the recent stories.

Hendrick Motorsports is yet to find its way to victory lane this season, which is definitely big news, but bigger yet is the fact that Jimmie Johnson and Jeff Gordon are outside the top 12. Dale Jr. is presently the flag bearer at this point of the season as he sits in fifth place in the point standings. There is no panic at

HMS, but Johnson didn't get to enjoy his first open weekend of the season as his team went testing at Rockingham and Kentucky to try and find out what has been causing some of their early season woes.

Tony Stewart finished second at Atlanta but when he crawled out of his Toyota, he blasted Goodyear for what he called the worst tire that he had ever raced on in his career. After Tony went public with his displeasure with Goodyear, several other drivers also expressed their concerns but only in a more respectable manner. Goodyear is aware of its problems but like every team in the garage, it is also still trying to get a handle on the new car that is being used. The tire maker has been bringing only one tire to the track each weekend that sometimes includes Nationwide and Craftsman Truck Series races. The question has been raised how one tire can be suitable for the three different series when the Cup car now features a rear wing and front splitter which makes it totally different from anything else that races during the weekend.

NASCAR loves parity and this year has to have everyone at its Daytona headquarters walking around with a huge smile on their face. After five races, ev-

ery manufacturer has at least one win with Ford being the only multiple race winner, thanks to back-to-back wins by Carl Edwards.

Joe Gibbs Racing is the driving force behind Toyota's Camry becoming one of the cars that you have to beat anytime the green flag waves. Gibbs's Kyle Busch won Toyota's first-ever race at Atlanta and sits on top of the points going into next weekend at Martinsville. The success of Gibbs has also spread throughout the rest of the Toyota camp, as there are now a total of eight teams racing the Camry safely inside the top 35.

Point trading has become a hot topic in the sport after Penske Racing swapped owner's points between Kurt Busch and Sam Hornish Jr. before the beginning of the season to ensure that Hornish would make the first five races while Busch could rely on his past champion's provisional if he got into trouble. After last week's race at Bristol, the subject came up once again when Kyle Petty and Jamie McMurray found themselves outside of the all-important top 35. Both have teammates in Bobby Labonte and Matt Kenseth that are former champions and presently sit inside the top 35. Both teams said they wouldn't be trading points

at this time, but it is something that could apparently be done at any time during the season under present NASCAR rules.

Richard Childress Racing has replaced Hendrick Motorsports as Chevrolet's premier team at this point of the season. Childress's Kevin Harvick, Jeff Burton and Clint Bowyer are all three in the top 10 in points at this time with Burton taking Chevy to its only victory lane appearance of the year last weekend at Bristol. The three have combined for nine top-10 finishes out of 15 starts, with five of them being top-5 finishes.

Carl Edwards leads the series with two wins but his win at Vegas was tainted after postrace inspection discovered that his oil tank was uncovered, which gives the car more down force. The infraction cost him 100 points which has him now in 16th place instead of eighth in the points. Even with the setback, he is leading Ford's return to the title hunt after an off year for the blue oval teams.

**Race Preview — Event:** Goody's Cool Orange 500. **Track:** Martinsville Speedway (.526-mile paper clip oval, 12 degrees of banking in the turns). **Date:** March 30, 2 p.m. **TV:** Fox. **Radio:** MRN. **Defending champion:** Jimmie Johnson.

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