

THE CATS' PAUSE



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Seniors Go Out As Winners

Mayes, Ransdell Star In Last Home Game

By Mike Estep

It was a game that few gave Kentucky a realistic chance of winning.

Certainly not the oddsmakers. The boys out in Las Vegas made the Gators solid nine-point favorites.

Everyone said that UK's only hope of even making the game respectable was to run the ball straight at the Gator defense, which was giving up over 175 yards per game on the ground. But the 'Cats leading rusher, Ivy Joe

Saturday, Kentucky was on the long end of a convincing, hard-fought, 10-3 win.

"Everyone played together," senior cornerback Tony Mayes said. "The seniors called a meeting last night. We called a meeting and we just talked together among ourselves.

"We said we've put in too much hard work—we've been through winter workouts, spring ball and all this stuff—to just let it all float away. I think all the seniors came out today, and all the other players wanted to help us win. We just put it all together."

"This was it for us," quarterback Bill Ransdell said. "We wanted to go out winners. People said we couldn't win the big game. We did it today. It's something to give everybody pride around here."

It was a fitting way for Mayes and Ransdell to finish their careers in front of the home folks. Both had been through the rough times—as redshirt freshmen during the 0-10-1 year. The dismal 5-6 season of a year ago. Both had been prime targets for disgruntled UK fans to vent their frustrations.

Mayes from his left cornerback position had been mentioned by many spectators in the same breath with their mother-in-law's cooking, "because he had burned so many times," in the last few years they said.

And Ransdell, although he holds many of the school's career passing marks, had heard the wrath of the boo-birds who held him largely responsible for UK's poor offensive showing in the four-game losing streak earlier in the year. After two outstanding years everybody said inflation had finally caught up with "Dollar Bill."

But Ransdell came through with what might have been his finest performance in Commonwealth Stadium, completing 20 of 23 passes on the afternoon—good enough to set a new school record for completion percentage at 86.9 percent.

And it was Mayes who was the hero on the defensive side, collecting four tackles and breaking up four passes. But most importantly, it was the senior from Paintsville that stripped UF's Nattiel of the ball at the UK 32-yard line, and then pounced on the pigskin with 29 seconds remaining to seal the win.

"We were in man coverage and he broke across the middle and caught the ball on me," Mayes said. "It's something they teach us. If they've got you beat, go for the ball. I stripped him of it with one hand and recovered the ball.

"I couldn't have felt any happier. We needed it bad."

Kentucky did need the game badly. To keep their hopes alive for a winning season. To help in recruiting. For the seniors to walk out of Commonwealth Stadium for the last time as winners.

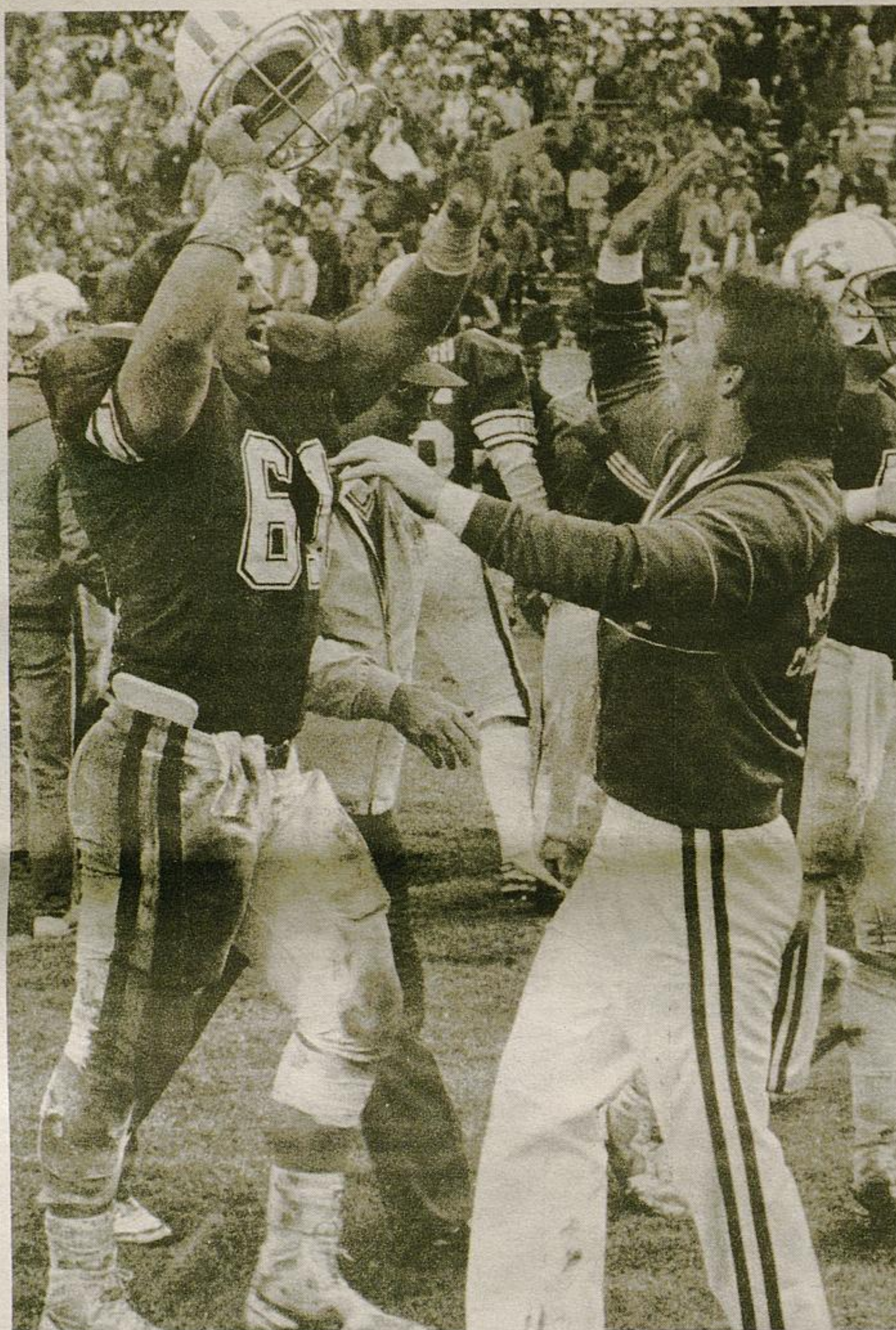
Many of the UK seniors were comparing this one with the big wins two years ago against Tennessee in Knoxville and over Wisconsin in the Hall of Fame Bowl.

"This win is probably the best win I've ever had," offensive lineman Joe Prince said. "I'll tell you, we've had some hard times lately. And I think this team has shown some character in coming back. Today we just weren't going to let Florida beat us.

"(The Tennessee game) was a big win and sweet for everybody. That was a great win. We were 8-3 at that point. But I think this one has to rank right up there because we'd never beaten Florida."

To center Ken Lange, the win over Florida was even better.

"Oh, this is the greatest feeling I've ever had," Lange said. "I came the long way. I've been here three years and I had to work hard to get where I'm at. It just all came to a 'T' today. It all came true, all of my dreams. All the hard work's just paid off."



Kenny Lange — A Happy 'Cat

Surely not the press, most of whom were already putting the finishing touches on the epitaph of this Kentucky team.

On paper, everybody said Florida, not Kentucky, would be the team that came out of Commonwealth Stadium with the win.

Looking at the pregame stats, it was easy to see why:

Everyone saw that each team was heading in the opposite direction. Florida, after getting off to a disastrous 1-4 start, had come back with four straight victories, including two in a row in dramatic, come-from-behind fashion against Auburn and Georgia. On the other hand, Kentucky had won just one of its last five starts, and that win was only a 12-pointer at the expense of a miserable, cellar-dwelling Vanderbilt club.

Everyone saw that Kentucky's defense, a woeful ninth place in the SEC against the pass, was scheduled to go up against the lethal Kerwin Bell-Ricky Nattiel combo. Bell, one of the nation's best passers, was fresh off a 272-yard performance in which he completed 20 of 31 tosses against Vince Dooley's Dawgs. Nattiel, who was ranked second in the SEC in receptions with 7.7 per game, had been on the receiving end of three touchdown aerials from Bell in that game, despite playing with a separated shoulder.

Hunter, was to watch from the sidelines due to a hamstring pull suffered in his record-breaking day against Vandy. That left UK with only Mark Higgs, who had been held to just 92 yards in a five-game stretch earlier in the season, and Marc Logan, as healthy backs.

Everyone kept poking their noses in the history books all week, and came to the conclusion that although Kentucky seemed to be able to play Florida close in recent years (narrow 27-15 and 17-15 losses), the 'Cats would still come up short.

In fact, the book on Kentucky said that they couldn't come up with a big win against any of the SEC powers that annually dot the UK schedule. The 'Cats were 1-13 under Jerry Claiborne against what some called the Big Three—Florida, Georgia and LSU.

But games aren't played on paper.

What no one took into consideration were the intangibles. Pride. Heart. Determination.

Nineteen UK seniors took the field Saturday against Florida for what would be their swan song in Commonwealth Stadium. And they banded together and decided that this game, this year, they would reverse that ugly trend. Somehow, some way, they would beat mighty Florida.

They did. When the final horn sounded