Tigerland

1968-1969: A CITY DIVIDED, A NATION TORN APART AND A MAGICAL SEASON OF HEALING

BY WIL HAYGOOD
The following is a Columbus Monthly exclusive excerpt from author Vel Hamilton’s upcoming book, "Tigerland," an inspiring true story about a group of talented Columbus East High School athletes and their pursuit of state championships in both basketball and baseball, set against the backdrop of the civil, social and moral unrest of their times. "Tigerland" is scheduled to be published nationwide Sept. 18.

They were poor boys wedged into the turmoil of a nation at war and unrest. They were the sons of maids and dishwashers and cafeteria workers, poor as pennies and too proud to beg, but not to ask or borrow. Their mothers were among the large waves of those who had come from the Deep South, a sojourn begun in 1945 known as the Great Migration. The Pacific Coast and the Midwest were favored destinations. Families had fled by train or bus, escaping all those cotton fields and blades of injustice. Columbus, Ohio, was a stop on the above-ground railroad where families had come praying for new opportunities. The boys' fathers were mostly absent. Garnett Davis, the gifted third baseman on the baseball team, had a father, but he was stuck down in South Carolina, on a damn chain gang. Nick Conner, the pogo-jumping basketball player, had a father too, but one who had abandoned the family for another life in Cleveland. Basketball player Robert Wright’s father had murdered a man. Kenny Mizelle, who played second base, sometimes dreamed about his dead father. At least that’s what he had been told all these years. That his dad was dead. But he wasn’t. Boys will be boys, and blood rolls thick, and when it comes to fathers, it often rolls backwards. Their mothers could only implore them to look ahead, especially so because it was a tricky and dangerous time.

The year 1968 began convulsing and firing balling its way toward 1969. There was deep turmoil on the streets of America. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had tried to do something about it all, the poverty, the absence of fathers that cut into a bone of despair, the pitiful condition of black men and the uneven social fabric of America. But these boys were athletes—sinewy, quick and agile basketball and baseball players—blessed with a unique talent that, with the start of 1968, they were hoping could ward off the darkness. They were the Tigers of East High School.

Some of them lived in single-family homes that fronted a fertilizer plant—and the obligatory railroad trackst—just
off Leonard Avenue. Some lived in Poindexter Village, the government-funded public housing project, one of the first of its kind in the nation. (President Franklin D. Roosevelt had even come to the city for the dedication.) Still others lived in old apartment buildings behind Mount Vernon Avenue, where the bars and speakeasies were, where the gamblers sauntered about like roosters. Laws and boundaries had been drawn against their families long before they were born, consigning them to a segregated world on the east side of this Midwestern city. They were black boys in a white world, running, jumping and excelling inside that world.

They played most of their basketball games through that cold winter in a converted rodeo cow palace on the Ohio State Fairgrounds, where you could still get whiffs of the horse manure, but no one seemed to mind as the East High Tigers couldn't stop winning. The gym at the high school couldn't accommodate the thousands who wanted to see them play. Their games were often broadcast on radio, an uncommon occurrence at the time for any high school basketball team. Come baseball season the crowds vanished. At the away baseball games, there would sometimes be only one fan in the bleachers rooting for the Tigers, and that was the coach's wife. The boys actually didn't mind playing their baseball games away, in and around rural Ohio, because the diamonds were better at the other schools. They simply set about swinging their bats and blasting the ball into the cornfields. They looked like figures out of the Negro Baseball Leagues, which were by now two decades removed from existence. The umpires—white men raised in the natural flow of segregation—sometimes would gawk at them with awe. They were so proud at game's end, tired and smiling as the farmland receded into view on the ride back home. The proud black boys never complained about the well-to-do schools, and all their fancy equipment. They realized they didn't have the comfort of escaping the crazy and murderous times. They were in the center of it.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s presence hovers over that season. Rev. Phile Hale was the unofficial minister of the East High basketball and baseball teams. He had known King from his own Georgia days and was the first to bring the prophet of black America to Columbus. The running down of King in Memphis on April 4, 1968, was an awful deed that unleashed riot and rebellion from Los Angeles to Columbus itself. In nearby Indianapolis, Bobby Kennedy spoke movingly of King's death, blacks and whites weeping around him like a gospel chorus. Then, like King, Kennedy also fell from the bullets of a crazed assassin. Hale had counseled these East High athletes with King-like optimism. He had told them to hold on. He had told them change was going to come. Now, with King's death, Hale, who had given the citywide eulogy, was himself emotionally spent. King and his wife, Coretta, had slept in Rev. Hale's home. It seemed, at ground level, that a nation was unraveling. It was a year of endless apocalypse. King and Kennedy had warned that black and white must come together, though King long before and with much more passion than Kennedy. But now the question loomed: What integration? East High, in the 1968–69 school year, and in spite of integration laws, remained an all-black school. In the fall of 1968 when Jack Gibbs—the first black principal at East High—opened the doors to the cavernous school, he did not know what to expect. The air was uneasy and unpredictable.

Gibbs had his own tortured story. He had escaped Harlan, Kentucky, a dangerous coal mining town where he had seen murderous deeds on the dirt streets there. In Columbus he worked nights, finished high school and got into Ohio State University, where he played football. He was a scrub, but had come off the bench in a very important game (Michigan, of course) and made the play that turned the game.
around. In time he found himself on East Broad Street, at East High School, on the fault lines of rise or ruin, depending on which side of the street you stood.

The basketball- and baseball-playing athletes at East High that year had their own narrative arc to create. They would brush away the fires of discontent and neighborhood pain, replacing it all with a far more glorious timepiece. They would become champions amidst the upheaval. They had two white coaches, Bob Hart in basketball and Paul Pennell in baseball, bighearted men who had a social conscience. Hart was a product of rural Ohio and had survived the landing at Normandy during World War II. He came home from the war with medals. And also with a sickening feeling about all he had seen in the military when it came to how blacks were treated. In the mid-1950s he took a job at all-black East High. Other white teachers cried their way out of assignments there; he exulted in the posting. “Basketball in the ’60s became a place where the black kid could show off his talent,” is how he would put it regarding the social and political forces at play. “And there was a different breed of kid. They were hungry.” Pennell, the baseball coach, hailed from the West Side of Columbus, known as the most inhospitable part of town when it came to integration. He was in his early 20s and given the job almost as an afterthought. What he aimed to do was prove to the outside world—anyone beyond this segregated neighborhood—that black boys could play baseball. Because there were so many who needed reminding.

Amidst all the pain—the martyred deaths, the glass-strewn streets, the military tanks patrolling the neighborhoods, the city’s intermittent juvenile curfew—change was indeed coming. And some of it came in the form of two statewide athletic championships—erupting just 60 days apart—in a time of ceaseless turmoil in a city situated on the banks of the Scioto River. It was here, through the fall, winter, and spring of 1968 and 1969, that a season of glory took place in a nation’s history. It was here, in the storefronts up and down Mount Vernon Avenue, that the salesmen and saleswomen began, at first, pinning those portraits of the slain Martin Luther King Jr. to the storefront windows. Then a short while later—to the same walls and windows—they began pinning portraits of those basketball and baseball-playing boys from the neighborhood.

A dreamer was shot down, but the prophet had left more than just anguish behind. Twenty-seven limber black boys across two sports would rise up through the smoke. They had something to prove to the world.

* Not a single sportswriter in the state predicted greatness for the 1969 East High baseball team. By mid-June, they were state champions.
Haygood on “Tigerland”

BY ERIC LYTLE

When did you first start thinking about writing this book?
The story has fascinated me for many years. I would even think about it when I was in the middle of my other book projects.

When did you graduate from high school? How far removed were you from 1968?
The only sport I was obsessive about was basketball. And it just so happened that I lived maybe eight blocks from the Fairgrounds Coliseum. So I was at Indianapolis Junior High School the year that I wrote about. East was such a marquee team that me and my friends in the north end, we would beg for a $1.50 to get a ticket to go to the Coliseum to see East High School play.

My mother moved to the Bolivar Arms housing projects [on the East Side] the summer when I was 13 years old, and it was a completely different vibe on the East Side. My eyes had to be opened wider, was more demanded of me from my senses. ... It was more crowded there. I had to be more alert. And yet, too, I knew that this was the landscape of the mighty, mighty East High Tigers. And one of the things about this completely new landscape that I quickly found out was that the cult—the cult, the image—of East High School was very, very epic, was very, very big. In my heart and soul, it's sort of astonishing to me that I left the East Side, went to college at Miami University and became a writer, and I think the same sharp sensitivity that I had when I moved to the East Side drew me back to this story. This is not the story that I was born to write. I don't like that phrase. But I will say it is the story that the rest of America needs to know about. And I'm all about bringing stories out of the shadows.

I can see some similarities with some of your other works, not only in the biography sections of Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King, but the part about bringing the mothers to that state championship game and having them file in proudly. It's such a great moment.

When I was talking to my editor, Peter Gatherers, about this book early on, he had told me, “I want to see the homes. Who was inside of these homes? I want to see the sacrifices that were made by family members.” And so that struck a chord with me because high school athletes need their mothers to support them, to help with their meals, to make sure that they're out the door on time, to make sure that they're studying to stay eligible. All of that really resonated with me, and so when I would track down these players, one of the first things I would want to hear would be the story about their mother: who she was, where she came from, what type of work she did. So many of these mothers were housewives. That is something that I certainly did not know going into the book, but it was a haunting reality of the times. And of all the years in the 60s, 1968 certainly was about the most heartbreakding. Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated. Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. There was such uncertainty in the country, and yet, here was a story where triumph prevailed.
Central Ohio hosts "Tigerland" release parties

Author Wil Haygood will launch the release of his latest book, "Tigerland," by conducting a number of readings and book signings in Central Ohio. The official release party will take place Sept. 19 at 7 p.m. at the Lincoln Theatre. U.S. district court judge Algeron Marbley will host a Q&A with the author at this event. Tickets are $25 and $50. lincolntheatreohio.com/tigerland.html

A free, community-wide celebration of Haygood's book and the East High School athletes and coaches celebrated in "Tigerland" will take place Sept. 20 at 7 p.m. at East High School. Guests will include members of those 1968-69 teams, as well as Mayor Andy Ginther and Columbus City Schools superintendent John Stanford. Haygood also will speak and read Sept. 21 at noon at Columbus State Community College and on Sept. 25 at 3 p.m. at Beasley High Schools Schottenstein Theatre. Both events are free and open to the public, though registration is required for the Beasley event: gramercybooksbesley.com/events

left North High a year earlier rather than heed his coach’s order to trim his Afro—had stood his ground and was now on a state championship team. His mother, Lucy, up in the stands, had forgotten all about her pounding migraines. Eddie Rat—the golden boy of the golden moment—had dropped in 31 defiant points against McKinley. He was clipping down the nets and raising them above his head for everyone to see.

The Tiger players began circling their trophy to get a better look.

Bob Rupert, the McKinley coach, had his own opinion about what Bob Hart’s Tigers had just accomplished inside St. John Arena: “This team is of a different era,” he said.

When the big glistening trophy was finally handed over to the Tiger assembly, another round of roaring erupted inside the arena.

Someone handed Eddie Rat the microphone. He talked about sportsmanship and thanked the McKinley players for theirs. He thanked the fans of East High. Then he instructed his teammates to go find their mothers in the stands and escort them onto the court. And a short while later there they were, the Tiger mothers. Mildred Mizelle, escorted by her son, Kenny; Erma Wright, escorted by her son, Robert; Barbara Crump, escorted by her son, Eddie Rat; Lucy Lamar—in a beautifully printed hat—escorted by her son, Bo-Pete; Beatrice Conner, escorted by her son, Nick; Barbara Sawyer, escorted by her son, Kevin Smith; and on and on they came, until all the players and their mothers were at center court.

Anticipating victory, Jack Gibbs had hatched a plan utilizing the help of Kirk Bishop, the East High student and youngest deejay in the city. James Brown, the messianic soul singer, was appearing in Columbus at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium that very night. Brown had been riding a crest of favorable publicity for months because of his actions in Boston the day after the King assassination. Boston was one of the few big American cities that

started clearing his bench players, allowing his stars to exit to standing ovations. Hart’s daughters began making their way toward their dad down on the floor. Mayor Senns- brenner was doing his awkward Tiger Rag jig again in the stands, drawing guffaws from all around. Jack Gibbs, a man both tough and emotional, was smiling. Down on the court, the McKinley players looked dejected. On the Tiger bench, Eddie Rat was trying to say something to Nick Conner, and Roy Hickman was trying to say something to Larry Walker. Everyone’s words got drowned out by the noise. When the final seconds vanished from the clock. Bob Hart and his band of Tigers had achieved something historic, something no other Columbus high school had ever done: They had won back to back state basketball titles. But this one was different, and everyone knew it. This one had come in the aftermath of Dr. King’s assassination. This one had come with the school feeling its very soul was on the line. This one had come amidst so much pain.

The players from both teams walked toward one another for the traditional handshakes. The Tiger cheerleaders were sashaying. Athletic officials made their way to the center of the court to present the winning trophy. Mayor Senns- brenner was excitedly looking for the City Hall photographer to make sure he got lots and lots of pictures! Flashbulbs were popping. Bo-Pete Lamar—the rebel, the transfer who
Their fathers were mostly absent. Many of their mothers worked as maids. But nothing, from segregation to civil unrest, could keep the 1968 Tigers from emerging as basketball champions.

basketball player Kevin Smith. "He was soaking wet. Our mouths were wide open." There was something that really impressed basketball player Larry Walker: "I finally met someone shorter than me." Cynthia Chapman, the cheerleader, looked down at Brown's footwear. "He was wearing lifts in his shoes," she says.

Kirk Bishop rushed out to the stage area and got permission to bring the victorious team on stage and introduce them. Brown had congratulated the team and was going to leave. But when he started hearing Bishop's commentary—about the long hard year it had been, and how the school had stuck together—he couldn't resist. He walked back out on stage; the audience erupted. He took the microphone. "Look at them," he said, his voice gravelly and sweet with respect. "They champions."

Columbus native Wil Haygood is an award-winning journalist, author and cultural historian and has published eight books, including the upcoming "Tigerland" as well as "Showdown: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court Nomination that Changed America," "Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson," "In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis Jr." and "The Haygoods of Columbus." His 2008 Washington Post story about White House butler Eugene Allen, who served under eight presidents from Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan, was adapted into the major motion picture "The Butler," directed by Lee Daniels, and Haygood's book "The Butler: A Witness to History" has been translated into more than a dozen languages.