

Tournament '81:

Where The Underdogs Were Top Dogs

By John Tishler
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All Bob Weltlich could do was shake his head. He was totally alone. It was cold outside, and Weltlich felt great despair. It was January 10 and the Ole Miss head coach was sitting in the press room at Ted Smith Coliseum with his thoughts following Alabama's 74-46 thrashing of Ole Miss in a game that saw the Rebels shoot a miserable 31 percent from the floor for the game while the Tide made 51 percent of their field goals. Weltlich had just told the media gathering that the whole Ole Miss basketball program would have to be rebuilt—from the ground up. Little did he know that that rebuilding job would take exactly 56 days and culminate in the Rebels' winning the school's first SEC Tournament championship.

Ah, the Southeastern Conference Tournament! Ask Bob Weltlich about it and he will praise it all day long. He'll tell you about how it gives everybody a new chance—as if everyone were starting over again. Just like it gave his Rebels a fresh start only last year when Ole Miss finished sixth in the conference. A respectable year. Better than many of the prognosticators had thought. But then the Ole Miss team surprised its most loyal fans, even some of the team members. The Rebels beat Tennessee, Vanderbilt and Georgia to claim the conference basketball tourney title in a shocker. But to be fair to everyone, the 1981 SEC Tournament was filled with more surprises than Tiny Tim's Christmas.

The Tournament started according to plan as Vanderbilt put an end to Mississippi State's frustrating season with a 71-58 victory. Vandy shot the lights out in the first half, connecting on 77 percent of their field goals and running out to a 40-23 lead. That margin increased to 19 five minutes into the second half before the Bulldogs made it very interesting, pulling to within two at 51-49. But just as it looked that State would put it all



Elston Turner celebrates the Rebels championship.

together, they fell apart, losing the ball six of the next seven times down court, to put an end to the Bulldogs' hopes. The Commodores got balanced scoring with Al Miller scoring 17, Willie "Hutch" Jones getting 15 and Ted Young and Al McKinney picking up 12 apiece. Jeff Malone, as he had done all year, scored 18 points to lead Mississippi State, while Butch Pierre added 11 to the State total.

In the second game of the first night at Birmingham's Jefferson Civic Center Coliseum, Florida and Auburn squared off and as two arch-rivals will do, played a hum-dinger of a game, the Gators finally gaining a 50-48 overtime win over the Tigers.

The first half was dull, setting up a wild, wild second half. After one period of play, the Gators led 18-14. But things heated up in the sec-

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