

MY MARCH MADNESS

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[This Monday's Archive was originally published on March 29, 2006. It is a personal story meant to be fun and entertaining, but like all good stories, has an important moral to the story at the end. I hope you enjoy it and take the moral to heart.]

TTP, March 29, 2006

I don't know when the term "March Madness" regarding the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship came into usage, but it was well after my UCLA college days in the 1960s. This year's madness is focused on the sympathetic favorite, George Mason, and the nostalgic favorite, UCLA. It certainly has caused me to recall a March Madness of my very own.

The nostalgia is for the greatest achievement in the history of college athletics, Coach John Wooden's 10 NCAA championships in 11 years (1964-75), including seven in a row (1966-73), the NCAA winning-streak record of 88 consecutive victories and 38 straight NCAA tournament victories.

But none of that had happened by Thursday, March 19, 1964. The Bruins, led by center Fred Slaughter and guards Gail Goodrich and Walt Hazzard, were undefeated in the regular season, 30-0, had won the regionals the previous weekend at Corvallis, Oregon, and for the first time in UCLA history, were in the Final Four. UCLA was to play Kansas State in the semi-finals at Kansas City, Missouri tomorrow, Friday, March 20.

And I was bummed. I was in my room at the Sigma Nu fraternity house grousing on the phone to my best and oldest friend, John Peterson. John and I had grown up together in Glendale, and while he went to Cal-State Northridge and I to UCLA, we went to as many Bruin games together as we could. He was as big a fan as I was.

We groused about how what a stupid shame it was that we weren't going to see UCLA make history. "When's the first game?" John asked. I looked at my watch. It was 10am. "33 hours," I replied. "How far away is Kansas City?" he asked. "A long, long drive, and neither one of us has a car that will make it," I answered. We silently listened to each other's breathing and brain-wheels turning.

"Do you think we could do it?" I asked John. "With our thumbs? Hitchhike to Kansas City? Why not?" came his reply. John got his girlfriend to drop him off at the Sigma Nu house, and with \$50 between us in our pockets, we were off.

By 8pm we were stranded in the California desert on Route 66 between Barstow and Needles. Finally a beat-up Nash Rambler braked to a halt. It was a guy driving by himself. "How far you goin'?" we asked breathlessly. He answered, "Joplin." As in Joplin, Missouri.

He was a seedy looking guy named Ron who said he had to get to his mother's funeral, didn't have a car so had stolen this one, didn't have any money, his girlfriend was a hooker, and he hoped by the time he got to Albuquerque she would have whored up enough dough to wire it to him by Western Union.

We all got along great, and sure enough, the money was there in Albuquerque with a nice telegram from his sweetheart.

It was now well past midnight. Ron crashed in the back seat while John and I drove through the New Mexico night past Tucumcari, across the Oklahoma panhandle, woke Ron up and had breakfast in Liberal, Kansas. By the time Ron dropped us off in Wichita (KC being way to the north of Joplin) around noon, we thought we were doing great on time. Then the Kansas State Police busted us for hitchhiking on a highway.

It was my UCLA letterman jacket that ticked the cop off, as he was a big Kansas State fan. He said we could only try to get a ride on a country road, and we ended up in a haytruck. Things were not looking good. Then in a coffee shop in the middle of Kansas nowhere, this good ole boy to whom we told our plight volunteered to whisk us all the way in his hot rod pick up truck. He dropped us off right at the Municipal Auditorium in KC-MO just before 6pm.

It was half-time during the first semi-final between Duke and Michigan. UCLA-Kansas State followed. We had made it in time. There was just one small problem. We didn't have any tickets.

John spotted this program vendor struggling to wheel his portable booth out of the foyer. “Need some help?” we called out, he shrugged, and we helped him roll the thing into the arena with the uniformed guards holding the doors open for us. We thanked them.

UCLA proceeded to trounce Kansas State 90-84. John and I then proceeded to the Fairmont Hotel where the team and a lot of the alums were staying, and made straight for the bar. The wealthy alums there were in a jovial mood, and when we told them what we had done, they gushed about our college spirit, laughed their heads off over how we had snuck in with no tickets, bought us all we could drink, and gave us free tickets for the championship game.

Within a couple of hours we had scored a dozen tickets. We got to talk with Coach Wooden. Then we crashed on the carpet of a friendly alum’s room. The next morning we got to work scalping our tickets. By early afternoon we had sold every one, figuring we could sneak in again the same way.

Sure enough, during the Kansas State-Michigan consolation game, it worked like a charm. We ended up sitting on the floorboards next to the cheerleaders, who couldn’t believe what we had pulled off. UCLA took Duke apart, 98-83, with Gail Goodrich running circles around the Blue Devils and scoring 27 points.

The cheerleaders invited us to their celebration party. The whole Fairmont was a celebration party. We partied all night. We hitchhiked back to LA in a daze. All we could remember was getting stuck in a blizzard outside of Topeka. But we made it, and with four times as much money as we started out with.

It’s been my good fortune to have had a large number of extraordinary adventures in the remotest places on earth. Yet few are so memorable as hitchhiking to Kansas City with John Peterson. This was the experience we relived after 50 years of friendship before John passed away from brain cancer three years ago.

There really is a lot to be said for spontaneity. We really do get only one crack at life. We all need moments of March Madness in our lives, for sometimes those are the most memorable moments of all.

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