

## **THE NARRATIVE OF THE 1976 NCAA TOURNAMENT**

### **Indiana's Run To Perfection**



1976 had the potential for a new beginning in the world of college basketball. The previous twelve seasons had been dominated by John Wooden's UCLA Bruins. The Bruins won 10 national titles, made 11 Final Fours and only lost 22 games in total from 1964-75 (and eight of those were in 1966). They racked up perfect records four times and produced a legendary 88-game winning streak. The NCAA basketball season amounted to a coronation.

But the world of college hoops was changing. The NCAA Tournament itself was starting to open up. Conferences were allowed more than one bid per league. It wasn't anywhere near the landscape we see today where the best leagues routinely put 7-8 teams in the NCAA field, and programs certainly had to assume they needed to win their league in order to qualify for March Madness (a term that itself did not exist in 1976). But there would be the respite of an at-large bid offered to a small number of teams, and that change would be extremely significant in the 32-team NCAA field of 1976.

The biggest change though, was this: The Wizard of Westwood, John Robert Wooden, had retired after winning another championship in 1975. Would that finally open the doors to more competition for the sport's top prize?

At the head of the list of challengers was Indiana. Bob Knight's Hoosier program had made a Final Four in 1973, and then gone undefeated through the 1975 regular season. But an injury to star forward Scott May was too much to overcome in March, and Indiana dropped a heartbreaker in the regional final against Kentucky. The good news in Bloomington was that the key players were back in the fold and hungry for redemption.

May led the way, averaging 24 points/7 rebounds per game in 1976, and winning national Player of the Year honors. Kent Benson, a future #1 overall pick in the NBA draft, posted a 17/8 average at the center spot. Quinn Buckner was a reliable quarterback running the offense. Bobby Wilkerson and Tom Abernethy rounded out the starting lineup.

Indiana had a chance to make an early statement when they opened the season against UCLA in St. Louis. The Hoosiers pounded the Bruins 84-64. Before December was out, Indiana racked up wins over good teams in Florida State and Virginia Tech. The Hoosiers beat Kentucky in overtime. And Indiana won a three-day Christmas tournament at Madison Square Garden, capped off by beating NCAA-bound St. John's.

The Hoosiers kept winning through a Big Ten schedule that had them on the road for six of the first nine conference games. They narrowly escaped Ohio State. An even bigger scare came against Michigan at home, when they needed an improbable rally to force overtime, before winning 72-67. Indiana again knocked off the Wolverines in Ann Arbor, 80-74. They completed their second straight undefeated regular season. They were again ranked #1 going into the NCAA Tournament. And this time, the Hoosiers were healthy.

Michigan would be the big beneficiary of the more open rules for NCAA selection. The Wolverines had a terrific team, even if they were chasing the Hoosiers. Ricky Green was a 20 ppg scorer in the backcourt. Phil Hubbard was an excellent low-post player, averaging 15/11 per night. John Robinson was another good scorer and tough rebounder up front, while Wayman Britt provided scoring help on the perimeter for Green.

The Wolverine program had reached a regional final with the great Cazzie Russell two years earlier, and were aiming for their first Final Four since 1965. This 1976 edition played a good non-conference schedule. There was a tough 82-81 loss at Tennessee, and a 108-94 defeat against a very good UNLV squad. But Michigan strung together consistent wins against decent teams. They finished the year with a 21-6 record. And the fact they had come the closest of anyone to beating the mighty Hoosiers made the Wolverines a team to watch in the NCAA Tournament.

UCLA might not have had Wooden on the sidelines, and might have taken it on the chin from Indiana in the season opener, but the Bruin Dynasty wasn't going anywhere. They had two great players at forward, with Richard Washington and Marques Johnson. Andre McCarter was a reliable point guard and 7'2" Ralph Drollinger occupied the middle. UCLA bounced back from the IU loss to knock off good teams from Missouri and Notre Dame heading into conference play.

The Bruins faced competition in the Pac-8 Conference from Washington. The Huskies were led by James Edwards in the middle. A 7-footer and future part of the Bad Boy Detroit Pistons championship teams in the late 1980s, Edwards averaged 18 points/7 rebounds per game. Lars Hansen went 6'10" and averaged a 14/8. A big front line was rounded by 6'7" Kim Stewart and the backcourt was fueled by Clarence Ramsey and his 16ppg.

UCLA and Washington were the class of the Pac-8 Conference. Each team split with Oregon and Oregon State, and beat everyone else. The difference came when the Bruins beat the Huskies head-to-head twice, each when Washington came in ranked in the top 10. UCLA took home the conference title and was ranked #5 going into NCAA play. Marv Harshman's Huskie program still got their first NCAA invite since 1953.

Al McGuire came to Milwaukee in 1965 and took over a Marquette program that had been just sporadically successful prior. Two years later, he won 21 games. In 1968, the Warriors began a run of making the NCAA Tournament and advancing at least as far as the regional weekend. The only exception was 1970—although in that year, a 20-3 Marquette team turned down an NCAA bid because McGuire didn't like his bracket placement. Instead, he went and won the NIT. In 1974, Marquette made it all the way to the national championship game.

The '76 Warriors had high expectations, ranked #4 in the preseason poll, and they more than lived up to them. The best two players were at forward--Earl Tatum, a senior, averaged 18/7 and junior Bo Ellis was good for a 12/9. These upperclassmen were surrounded by three good sophomores—Butch Lee and Lloyd Walton in the backcourt, and Jerome Whitehead at center.

This time period was the glory era for Catholic basketball in the Midwest, with Notre Dame and DePaul joining Marquette as unaligned independents, and playing at a high level. In South Bend, Digger Phelps arrived in 1972 and took over a program that had never reached a Final Four. Phelps was now fresh off two straight years where he had made the Sweet 16. For good measure, Phelps' Irish had also ended UCLA's historic 88-game winning streak in January of 1974. In 1976, Notre Dame was led by an electric scorer, Adrian Dantley. With a big NBA future ahead of him, Dantley was pouring in 29 ppg and getting double-digit rebounds.

As for DePaul, veteran head coach Ray Meyer, a fixture on the sidelines in Chicago going back to World War II, had been bringing the program back from a bottoming out in 1971 when they only won eight games. The Blue Demons had been stringing together winning seasons since then, but yet to return to NCAA play. In 1976, they were led by the trio of Ron Norwood, Joe Ponsetto, and Dave Robinzine. Norwood was a guard and his 19 ppg led the team. Ponsetto was at forward and Robinzine was a future NBA center. Each averaged 16/9 per night.

All three Catholic schools in the Midwest would make this 1976 NCAA Tournament, but Marquette was a cut above the rest. The Warriors rose to #2 in the polls. They beat the Irish head-to-head in a big showdown of Top 10 teams at the end of the season.

There have been a lot of changes in college basketball since 1976, most notably the implementation of a shot clock on the national level in 1986 and the three-point line a year later.

An underrated change is this—in 1976, the NCAA still did not formally seed teams for the tournament. Geography was the primary driver of the bracket. Marquette was placed in the same regional as Indiana. Yes, the 1-2 teams in the country were on a collision course to play in the Elite Eight.

Indiana not only had the nation's second-ranked team in their own regional, they weren't even the only undefeated squad in the 1976 NCAA Tournament. The Rutgers Scarlet Knights, then an independent, were led by 6'5" swingman Phil Sellers and guard Mike Dabney. Both players knocked down 19 ppg. Eddie Jordan was at point and averaged 14 points/5 assists. Hollis Copeland and James Bailey hit the boards. No one on Rutgers went taller than 6'9", something that was more outside the norm than it would be in today's spread-the-floor style. But it worked.

It worked to the tune of an unranked team working their way into the Top 20 after a 5-0 start. It worked to the tune of dropping 119 points on a decent Seton Hall team coached by future TV analyst Bill Raftery (I'm guessing Seton Hall came out man-to-man).

By the end of January, the Scarlet Knights were 15-0 and on a run of scoring at least 100 points in four straight games. They went on the road to play Princeton, the best team in the Ivy League. Pete Carrill's program was en route to dethroning Penn, who had been dominant in the first part of the 1970s. Princeton's balanced lineup was led by Ivy League MVP Armond Hill, who averaged 14/4/4 in the backcourt. They could slow the game down, run a disciplined offense and play good defense.

Rutgers showed they could win more ways than one, by outlasting Princeton 75-60. The final game of the season came in Madison Square Garden against St. John's, in an event that essentially boiled down to a conference tournament. Lou Carnesecca had taken over the Redmen in 1966. After four years and a couple of Sweet 16 trips, "Looie" jumped to the American Basketball Association where he coached for three years. After returning to St. John's in 1974, Carnesecca had a pair of 20-win seasons, but was looking to return to the NCAAs.

St. John's had a balanced lineup, led by 6'7" sophomore George Johnson, who averaged 14 points/10 rebounds. Glen Williams was a good scorer in the backcourt and four starters averaged in double-figures. Rutgers solidified themselves as a national contender by beating the Redmen 70-67. It was enough to close the season ranked #4 nationally and be placed in the East Regional. St. John's reward? Another date with an undefeated team, as they were moved to the Mideast bracket to play Indiana in the first NCAA game.

That was the landscape among the very best teams in the country. Indiana and Marquette were eyeing each other from across the Mideast Regional. Rutgers was the favorite in the East. UCLA was ranked #5 and looking at a potential regional final battle with third-ranked UNLV in the West. The unbalanced nature of the bracket meant the Midwest was the softer one, with Michigan and Notre Dame the highest ranked of the eight teams in that regional draw.

## **THE ROUND OF 32**

All 16 first-round games were played on Saturday, March 13. Here we go, around the country...

## **Mideast Regional**

### ***South Bend***

Indiana was able to start its title drive close to home, playing St. John's in a nationally televised game. Scott May came out firing. He hit 14-fo-23 from the field. Of his eight baskets in the first half, six came off assists from Bobby Wilkerson.

St. John' s hung around and was within 44-37 at the half, behind good shooting from Glenn Williams and Frank Alagia, who both played well and ended up with a combined 37 on the afternoon. But Indiana had too much firepower. May finished with 33 points. Benson scored 20 and grabbed 13 rebounds. Buckner chipped in 15. The Hoosiers pulled away and won 90-70.

One of Bob Knight's disciples, Don DeVoe, was coaching Virginia Tech in the other game at South Bend. DeVoe came to Blacksburg in 1972, inheriting a program that was a consistent winner, albeit not an NCAA Tournament team. DeVoe won 22 games in 1973, but was still looking for his first NCAA trip. He got it this season behind a 20 ppg scorer in 6'6" Russell Davis. Larry Cooke added 16ppg, Dave Sensibaugh was a skilled playmaker, while Ernie Wansley and Kyle McKee cleaned up the boards.

The Hokies had played a difficult schedule as an independent, losing games to Indiana, Marquette, and ACC regular season champ North Carolina. They also lost at DePaul. On the flip side, Virginia Tech beat eventual NCAA teams from Memphis, Virginia, and Syracuse.

Here in this Round of 32 game they were taking on MAC champ Western Michigan and the Hokies spurted out to a 39-30 lead by halftime. But they were not shooting the ball well. Davis delivered a 16/11 line, but his 7-for-18 shooting was mediocre. Cooke had a very rough day, going 5-for-29 and turning the ball over seven times.

While Tech got a terrific game from Duke Thorpe, who hit seven of nine shots, scored 19 points, and hauled in nine rebounds, their turnover problems let Western Michigan back into the game. The Broncos got 25 from Jeff Tyson, although his 11-for-27 shooting left something to be desired itself. Western Michigan's inside people, Tom Cutter and Paul Griffin, really went to work and combined for 31 points and 16 rebounds.

The Broncos pulled even 65-65 when Tyson nailed one from 20 feet with under a minute to go. The game went to overtime, but the momentum was with Western Michigan, and they dominated the extra period, winning 77-67.

The way the bracket was set up did *not* mean Indiana and Western Michigan would play each other next. For their opponents in the regionals, each school would have to wait and see what happened in Dayton.

## **Dayton**

The legendary Dean Smith was already in his 15<sup>th</sup> year on the sidelines at Chapel Hill in 1976. Smith had taken North Carolina to four Final Fours and was set to be the Olympic coach this coming summer in Montreal, where he would win the gold medal. With over twenty years of coaching still ahead of him, Smith was already a legend—but also one still seeking his first national championship.

North Carolina was led by ACC Player of the Year Mitch Kupchak, and his 18 points/11 rebounds per game. Phil Ford, a sophomore point guard who would one day win National Player of the Year honors, scored 19 and dished seven assists per game. Walter Davis was a prolific scorer, good rebounder, and solid passer on the wings. Tom LaGarde hit the boards and John Kuester helped Ford with ball-handling duties.

The Tar Heels got his as #3 in the polls and blew out the ACC race, clearing the field by four games. They lost in the conference tournament, but that no longer had to be a death blow to a team's season. North Carolina finished the season #8, and added to the muscle in a stacked Mideast Regional.

North Carolina ran into an excellent Alabama team. Leon Douglas, the Crimson Tide center, basically owned Kupchak up and down the floor in this game. Douglas put up an electric 35/17 line. While UNC got a great game from LaGarde, at 22/11 Ford, Kupchak and Davis all had rough shooting performances. North Carolina shot just 37 percent from the floor, compared to 53 percent for Alabama. The Crimson Tide controlled the game and won decisively, 79-64. They would be the next team to get a crack at Indiana.

Marquette's opponent was Western Kentucky. The Hilltoppers had a strong basketball history. They won the Ohio Valley's first conference title in 1949, and went on to take 10 of the OVC's first 13 championships. Nor were they just a quick out in NCAA play—Western Kentucky made a Final Four in 1971. The '76 Hilltoppers had a 6'2" guard in Johnny Britt who not only knocked down twenty a night, he also averaged six rebounds and four assists. Western Kentucky won another OVC crown, both regular season and tournament, to punch their ticket here to Dayton.

The Hilltoppers then proceeded to give Marquette some early problems. Western's zone defense slowed Marquette down and the Warriors trailed 24-18. McGuire took a timeout for the express purpose of giving his players the here-tos and what-fors. Properly chastised, Marquette hit their next six shots and took a 30-24 lead.

McGuire's defense also began forcing turnovers and the Warriors would enjoy a 20-9 edge in this category by day's end. Butch Lee scored 21, while Earl Tatum added 18. Bo Ellis attacked the glass, getting 14 rebounds. Marquette was up seven at halftime and then pulled away after intermission to win 79-60.

So, the Sweet 16 matchups were set. It would be Indiana-Alabama, and Marquette-Western Michigan when play resumed on Thursday in Baton Rouge.

## **East Regional**

### ***Providence***

Rutgers played a rematch with Princeton. As Georgetown would find out in 1989, dealing with Carrill's Tigers as a favorite was anything but fine. Rutgers was held to 38 percent shooting from the floor. Mike Dabney and Phil Sellers were a microcosm. While getting 13 points apiece, the pair combined to shoot 8-for-29 from the floor. In the meantime, Princeton was shooting 56 percent and a balanced attack had four players between 10-14 points for the game.

What the Scarlet Knights were doing though, was forcing turnovers. They finished with ten steals on the day, four from Sellers. Eddie Jordan gave them some shooting, scoring 16 points on 7-for-11 from the floor. It was enough to have Rutgers clinging to a 54-53 lead in the closing seconds. Then Princeton's Pete Molloy was fouled.

The foul wasn't in the act of shooting, so Molloy would have to make a one-and-one to give the Tigers the lead. He missed the front end. The Scarlet Knights had survived.

UConn and Hofstra played the other matchup in Providence. Hofstra was a new program, at least in Division I. After playing one year at this level during World War II, they had disappeared until 1966. After three years of building under head coach Roger Gaeckler, they were primed for bigger things. Led by Rich Laurel, a 6'7" forward who averaged 20/7, and guard Ken Hood, who knocked down 15ppg, Hofstra went 15-11 during the regular season. Then they got a run in their conference tournament, upsetting Lafayette. A league tournament rife with upsets meant Hofstra was able to beat lowly Temple 79-72 and get an automatic invite to the NCAA.

And that momentum kept rolling for one half here in Providence. Hofstra led UConn 43-30 at the half. But Laurel was having a tough day, held to an 11/4 line. Hofstra was making up for it with 18 points from Hood, and 9-for-9 shooting from John Irving, but UConn closed the gap. Joe Whelton knocked down 23 for the Huskies. Al Weston scored 18. And Jeff Carr was tough down low, scoring 17 and hauling in 15 rebounds. Carr and John Thomas keyed a decisive rebounding edge for the Huskies. They pulled even and forced overtime at 75-75.

UConn ultimately pulled out an 80-78 win in the extra session. No one could say the fans who came to Providence for this Saturday doubleheader hadn't gotten their money's worth.

### ***Charlotte***

Virginia was another team that played their way into the NCAAs via their conference tournament. A pedestrian season was followed by winning the ACC Tournament. And the Cavs were another team that kept that momentum going for a half, taking a 37-31 lead over DePaul at intermission, and then briefly extending that lead to 45-38 in the second half.

What the Blue Demons had going for them was Norwood. The guard was red-hot and shot 11-for-15 from the floor. When his team trailed by seven, he hit a couple jumpers to tighten the margin. And down the stretch, Norwood took this game over. He scored 19 of DePaul's final 31

points, finishing with 28 on the afternoon. Ultimately, Virginia cooled and shot 40 percent as a team. The Blue Demons won 69-60.

Tennessee had been fueled all year by two great players, Ernie Grunfeld and Bernard King. But an injured left thumb kept King on the bench for this NCAA Tournament date with Virginia Military Academy (VMI). It was up to Grunfeld to carry the load, and he nearly did it, going off for 36 points and eight rebounds.

But it wasn't enough. VMI was getting contributions everywhere. Ron Carter scored 19 points and had 14 rebounds. Will Bynum knocked down 20. John Krovic scored 17. Curtis Reprint, while having some turnover problems, also handed out five assists. VMI got the win, 81-75.

The regionals in the East would be held at Greensboro. The matchups were to be Rutgers-UConn and VMI-DePaul.

## **Midwest Regional**

### ***Denton***

Wichita State was the first opponent for Michigan. The Shockers program had been struggling since making the Final Four in 1965. The current head coach, Harry Miller, came into 1976 on a run of four straight losing seasons and had yet to make an NCAA Tournament. But this year would be different.

Wichita State had a balanced lineup with four players averaging 12-13ppg. Robert Gray was the most well-rounded, averaging 13 points/6 rebounds/6 assists. The Shockers showed they could compete with NCAA Tournament-caliber teams by splitting a pair of games with Memphis in non-conference play. Wichita State then went 10-2 in the Missouri Valley Conference and won the league title by a game. There was no conference tournament, so that punched the Shockers' ticket to the Dance.

And they gave Michigan a hair-raising experience in this Round of 32 game. Wichita State took a 41-35 at the half. That lead grew to as much as 60-48 in the second half. The Wolverines lost Phil Hubbard to his fifth foul with nearly eight minutes left. Michigan looked all but done.

But the Wolverine reserves stepped up. Behind Tom Bergen and Tom Staton, Michigan rallied and closed to within 73-72. With 38 seconds to play, Wichita center Robert Elmore went to the line for a one-and-one opportunity. He missed. The Wolverines came down, ran the clock down. Ricky Greene took the decisive shot, a 20-footer with six seconds left. He made it. Michigan pulled out a 74-73 thriller.

Syracuse faced Texas Tech in this venue's other game. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, this was a historic season for the Orange basketball program. With Ray Danforth in his last year as head coach, 1976 was, as of this writing in January 2023, the last time Syracuse didn't have the legendary Jim Boeheim as head coach. Although Jimmy B was on the sideline as an Orange assistant.



This was a Syracuse team coming into NCAA play moving backward. They had built a 17-4 record by late February. But as the schedule got tougher, the Orange began to get exposed. They lost by double digits to both Rutgers and St. John's. A narrow two-point loss to Niagara was followed by another double digit defeat, this one in the home finale at Virginia Tech.

The postseason structure for Eastern independents, which Syracuse was at this time, saved the season. They hosted a pseudo-conference tournament at Manley Field House, where they beat Manhattan, got revenge on Niagara, and won the automatic spot in the NCAAs.

But they weren't a real match for Texas Tech in this game, who was ranked #16 in the country to end the season and came in with a 24-5 record. The Red Raiders got big games from Mike Russell, who posted a 21/12 line, and Rick Bullock, who knocked down 19 points. Texas Tech controlled the glass, to the tune of a 34-22 rebounding advantage. The Red Raiders were sloppy, and their 19 turnovers meant the game didn't get out of hand. But Tech was up eleven at halftime and won 69-56.

### ***Lawrence***

Missouri, the champion of the old Big Eight Conference, was staying in their home region to play Washington. The Huskies were the team who came out fast, holding leads of 11 points at two different times in the first half. The Tigers chipped that down to 36-30 by halftime, but Washington nudged back out to a 45-37 lead in the second half.

The Huskies were doing it with balance, ending the afternoon with four players getting 12-14 points. Lars Hansen and James Edwards each had ten rebounds and keyed an edge on the glass for Washington.

Missouri countered with the electric Willie Smith. Even though Smith had an off-day shooting, he still got 21 points, and handed out seven assists. Moreover, he came up with six steals. Mizzou was also getting to the free throw line, where they eventually outscored Washington by 12 points.

The result was a game that ultimately pulled even and went back and forth down to the wire. The Huskies nudged back out to a 65-61 lead with just over three minutes to play. The Tigers' Jim Kennedy answered with a driving layup. After a defensive stop, Mizzou got a Smith tip-in of a Kennedy miss to tie up the game again. Missouri got another stop. Again, they put the ball in Kennedy's hands. This time he got to the foul line, where he made both shots.

Now up 67-65, the Tiger defense kept delivering, with another big stop. Smith made two free throws to give Missouri a four-point cushion. Washington finally got a basket, and they got a last chance. But when Clarence Ramsey's 25-footer missed, it was the Tigers who survived, 69-67.

Notre Dame was also in Lawrence, and the Irish were paired up against Cincinnati. The Bearcat program had been the crown jewel of college basketball in the not-so-distant past. From 1959-63, Cincy made five straight Final Fours, won two national titles and gave the world the great Oscar Robertson. But as UCLA's star rose, Cincinnati's began to fade. From 1964-74, the

Bearcats continued to play winning basketball, but only made one NCAA Tournament in that 11-year stretch. In 1975, under head coach Gale Catlett, Cincy finally got back in.

In 1976, the Bearcats had some tough sophomores down low leading the way. Bob Miller and Pat Cummings combined to average 27 points/18 rebounds per game. Ranked #10 to start the season, Cincinnati got out to a 10-2 start and knocked off Denny Crum's Louisville, who had made the Final Four the previous March. The Bearcats finished the season 19-5. They got their NCAA bid by winning the Metro Conference tournament with a 103-95 win over Memphis.

Now, Cincinnati was matched up with Notre Dame. And this game would be dynamite. The Bearcats led 39-37 at the half. Cincinnati's balance was being matched by great play from Adrian Dantley and Duck Williams. The two Irish stars combined for 49 points. But with just 13 seconds left, Cincinnati had a 78-75 lead. Even though Notre Dame had the ball, the Bearcats were in command.

Williams scored quickly for the Irish to give his team a chance. The inbound pass from Cincinnati didn't go well, and was knocked out of bounds. But possession stayed with the Bearcats and the clock was down to eight seconds.

The next Cincinnati inbound effort went worse, ending with a five-second violation. Notre Dame would get the last shot, trailing 78-77.

Bill Paterno missed a jumper with four seconds to play. The Bearcats, with multiple defenders understandably targeting Dantley, couldn't box everyone out. That left Toby Knight room to come down the middle and get the tip-in. Notre Dame had won 79-78.

The Midwest Regional had been dynamic, with three of its games coming down to the last shot. Now, it was on to Freedom Hall in Louisville. The Sweet 16 matchups would be Michigan-Notre Dame and Missouri-Texas Tech.

## **West Regional**

### ***Eugene***

It was tough to think of a program with a more diametrically opposite history to UCLA, then that of San Diego State, at least in the world of 1976. The Aztec program was only six years old and they got their NCAA Tournament bid with a record of 14-13. Nothing like a date with the most powerful dynasty in the sport to get your postseason history started.

San Diego State had a big lineup, with all five starters going 6'6" to 6'8". Steve Copp and Will Connelly were the best players, combining for 35 points/18 rebounds per game. And they hung in with the mighty Bruins for the first half, trailing just 35-32 at intermission.

In the end, UCLA had too much talent. Even as the Aztecs held their own on the boards and forced the Bruins into 19 turnovers, UCLA shot 55 percent from the floor, while holding San Diego State to 34 percent. The trio of Richard Washington, Marques Johnson, and Andre

McCarter hit 21 of their 33 shots from the floor. Washington got 19 of his 25 points in the second half. The Bruins got control of the game and won 74-64.

Another young program, Boise State, was here to take a shot at UNLV. Boise State had started playing basketball in 1971 and was making their first NCAA Tournament appearance. The Broncos had 17 ppg scorers with Pat Hoke up front and Steve Connor in the backcourt. They had closed the regular season strong, winning six of their final seven games to share the regular season title in the Big Sky Conference. Then they won the title that counted to the NCAA, grabbing the league tournament crown and securing this spot.

Both UNLV and Boise State shot the ball well, clearing the 50 percent threshold from the floor. The Broncos got to the line, outscoring the Rebels 22-15 in free throw points. Boise got a big game from Connor, who knocked down 26, and forward Danny Jones, who posted an 18/9 line.

What they didn't get was production from Hoke. And what Boise *did* get was absolutely hammered on the boards. UNLV won the rebounding battle, 49-25. That added up to 87 shots from the floor to just 55 for Boise. Eddie Owens scored 24, while Jackie Robinson scored 20 and hauled in 13 rebounds. The Rebels were up 48-39 at halftime, and they blew it open in the second half, en route to a 103-78 win.

### ***Tempe***

Memphis' name has come up a few times in this telling, as a notable win that other teams got en route to the NCAA Tournament. The Tigers themselves were more about consistency and racking up the wins they were supposed to get, without fail. Memphis was led by 6'9" center Marion Hilliard, who averaged a 17/11 per night. The Tigers won 21 games, and the most notable victory was over Pepperdine. And it was the Green Wave that they were matched up against here in Tempe.

Memphis took a 41-38 lead at the half. The problem they had is that while Hilliard had a respectable game, his 11/8 line was below his normal standard. Dexter Reed and Bill Cook got their points, but at the cost of a combined 11-for-28 from the floor.

Meanwhile, Pepperdine had the best player on the floor. Marco Leite lit it up for 34 points and eight rebounds, on 12-for-22 shooting. Ollie Matson worked the inside for 19/11. With Flintie Ray Williams and Dick Skophammer also hitting the boards, Pepperdine won rebounding by a decisive 42-32 margin. And they just wore Memphis down, taking the game over in the second half and winning it, 87-77.

Another team shipped into Tempe from the East was Georgetown. In our own day, Hoya head coach John Thompson is a legend. The first black coach to win a national championship in 1984 and a program that became iconic in the 1980s. In 1976, Thompson was in his third year. He was looking for a breakthrough, after going 25-27 the first two seasons. Behind sophomore guard Derrick Jackson and his 17ppg, the Hoyas went 19-6.

That resume included an overtime win over St. John's. Also an independent, before the existence of the Big East, Georgetown got their postseason opportunity in a tournament at West Virginia Coliseum. They beat a decent Villanova team, and then 20-win George Washington to qualify for the Dance.

This breakthrough NCAA Tournament for Thompson brought him here, to play Arizona. Georgetown, showing the pressure defense that would one day make them famous, forced an astonishing 30 turnovers. Even more astonishing is that they still managed to lose the game. The Wildcats shot 56 percent, while the Hoyas struggled to 38 percent. Arizona got 40 free throw attempts to just 16 for Georgetown, and the Wildcats controlled the boards. Arizona led 41-32 at the half and won 83-76.

There would be home cooking in the West Regionals. UCLA was going home to Pauley Pavillion, where they would play Pepperdine, while Arizona was paired up with UNLV.

And that was your first weekend. It's quite the contrast to our own day, when the pairing of the field to the Sweet 16 is four days of wall-to-wall Madness. In 1976, one day of basketball did the trick. We were on to the regionals.

## **THE SWEET 16**

The slate of eight games all went on Thursday, March 18...

### **Mideast Regional**

#### ***Baton Rouge***

Alabama and Western Michigan came in as the teams hoping to put a monkey wrench into the anticipated Saturday game between Indiana and Marquette. Both underdogs came a lot closer than anyone might have expected.

The first round performance of Alabama's Leon Douglas had been fully in character with what he had done all season. Douglas averaged 20 points/12 rebounds. Reggie King, a 6'6" freshman was also good for a daily double-double. Rickey Brown went 6'8" and hit the boards. Anthony Murray scored 12ppg and ran the floor game. The Tide were coached by C.M Newton. Ironically, Newton was a good personal friend of Bob Knight's and would be Knight's top assistant at the 1984 Summer Olympics. On this Thursday night, Newton came close to a season-wrecking upset.

The first half went according to script, with the Hoosiers taking a 37-29 lead. Indiana would shoot a respectable 48 percent on the night and they outrebounded Alabama. But the Tide were forcing the Hoosiers into uncharacteristic turnovers, 20 of them in all. And the game stayed tight as the second half wore on.

Neither team's star player was shooting well. May got his numbers, 25/16, but at 9-for-22. Douglas was held to 12/7, shooting 5-for-16. But both supporting casts picked up the slack.

Indiana got a 14/12 line from Wilkerson. Alabama got 15 points/7 rebounds/5 assists from Murray, 16 points from T.R. Dunn and a valuable 11 points off the bench from Keith McCord. With just under four minutes to play, the Crimson Tide held a 69-68 lead.

That one-point margin held to around the two-minute mark. May knocked down a 15-footer to put Indiana back up front. Douglas had a chance to answer on the other end, but missed. Indiana couldn't close it out, and Alabama got another chance. The clock moved under a minute. McCord began a dribble-drive and there was contact with Buckner. No call was made either way and the ball came loose.

In a mad scramble, it was Indiana's Abernethy to come up with possession. He hit the free throws to give the Hoosiers control with a three-point lead. One last stop was followed by two more free throws. Indiana had started the game by scoring the first nine points and ended it by scoring the final six. They had survived, 74-69.

Western Michigan was led by Jeff Tyson, who played forward despite only going 6'3". He poured in 18ppg. Tom Cutter was undersized at center, going 6'8", but that didn't stop him from averaging a 13/11. In a Mid-American Conference that had no league tournament, the Broncos won a tough battle for first place over Miami-Ohio by sweeping the two games with their archrival. At 23-2, they had entered NCAA play ranked #10 in the nation. The Broncos' high ranking was just one more reason that this 1976 Mideast Regional was perhaps the most power-packed off all-time.

Marquette led 28-25 at the half, but could never get any separation. Western Michigan was still within one point, 58-57 with 2:24 left. The Warriors were forcing turnovers, while the Broncos were getting rebounds, allowing everything to even out.

At the 2:24 mark, Lloyd Walton drove the baseline, drew the defense and dumped off a pass to Bo Ellis for an easy layup. Marquette got one more defensive stop, and closed out the 62-57 win. It hadn't been pretty, but they had survived. Perhaps more concerning from the Warrior perspective was that, after a season of facing mostly zone defenses, Western Michigan's man-to-man had caused Marquette to be taken out of its rhythm. And their next opponent played nothing but man-to-man.

## **East Regional**

### ***Greensboro***

UConn got the next shot at Rutgers. The Huskie program that Dee Rowe took over in 1970 had a reasonably consistent record of getting to the NCAA Tournament, even if they didn't advance deep into the bracket. Rowe's tenure had been up and down, but the emphasis was more on the "up" starting in 1974, when he won 37 games over two years and set the stage for this return to the Dance in 1976.

Connecticut was led by the all-around talents of Tony Hanson, who averaged 19 points/7 rebounds/4 assists. Joe Whelton and Al Weston were each little guys, under 6 feet, but each

good for 15ppg. John Thomas was a beast on the boards, getting 14 rebounds a night. Playing a mostly non-descript schedule, UConn went 16-9 during the regular season. It took consecutive victories over 21-win teams—UMass and Providence—at their quasi-conference tournament, to get the NCAA bid.

So, just getting to the NAAs marked 1976 a good year in Storrs and winning the first game was some icing on that cake. UConn came out and played with nothing to lose. They were running at a fast pace. Even without a shot clock, Weston and Whelton were firing away from the backcourt early in possessions. The two guards combined to go 12-for-17 for 30 points in the first half alone.

Rutgers was running right with the would-be spoilers, playing full-court pressure. Mike Dabney, Eddie Jordan, and Hollis Copeland would combine to hit 22 of 37 shots for the game overall. And the Scarlet Knights led 53-47 at the half.

The torrid pace finally wore UConn down. Whelton cooled down and only scored two points after intermission. With the score 57-43, Rutgers went on a 14-4 run. Weston was able to finish with 24 points, Hanson posted a 23/9 line, and Thomas hauled in 19 rebounds. But the rebounding overall still came out even, and the Huskies finished at 41 percent shooting for the night. That 14-4 run early in the second half proved decisive, as Rutgers pulled away to win 93-79.

VMI had gotten to the Sweet 16 behind three swingmen, Ron Carter, Will Bynum and John Krovic. The trio all went between 6'4" and 6'6" and collectively, they scored 49ppg. The program's first winning season since 1941 ended up in the NCAA Tournament thanks to a conference tournament run that included a narrow escape over lowly Davidson and a 41-33 win over Richmond.

It wasn't inspiring, but a beatable opponent in DePaul was all that stood between VMI and the regional final. The game was razor-tight all the way. By rights, the Keydets should have been able to pull away. They got 42 free throw attempts compared to just 22 for DePaul. But VMI was a woeful 50 percent from the line. The game went to overtime, tied 62-all.

In the end, Carter and Bynum were the difference, combining for 43 points and 18 rebounds. Jeff Montgomery, who had done the thankless work in the middle all season long, did it again here to the tune of 14 boards. VMI controlled the extra period and won 71-66. Improbably, the Keydets were one step from the Final Four.

## **Midwest Regional**

### ***Louisville***

Michigan and Notre Dame are renowned for their football rivalry, one that wouldn't resume in earnest until 1978. In the present moment of 1976, the Wolverines and Fighting Irish were staging a pretty good basketball rivalry, one that included Michigan knocking ND out of this tournament two years earlier.

Their battle in the '76 regional semis would be a sizzler. Adrian Dantley was rolling for the Irish, and dropped 31 points. But he didn't get a lot of help. The Wolverines answered with balance. Rickey Greene's 20 points led Michigan, but all five starters scored at least 12. A tight game went down to the wire, when a crucial Notre Dame turnover proved the difference. The Wolverines pulled it out, 80-76.

The Texas Tech program was on a high in 1976, having made the NCAA Tournament in 1973, and then won 35 games over the next two years. Rick Bullock was tough and physical down low, averaging 23 points/10 rebounds. The Red Raiders played well in the early going against Missouri, taking a 25-22 lead with eight minutes to go in the first half.

Willie Smith had been quiet for the first 12 minutes, scoring just two points. That changed in a hurry. Smith got hot and hit six in a row from the outside. He was en route to a spectacular 30/10/7 night. Kim Anderson, a future head coach for this program, got 15 points and 11 boards. Bullock was tough, and posted a 23/14 line, but he also fouled with nine minutes to go. Missouri had the lead by halftime, and then controlled the second half in an 86-75 win.

## **West Regional**

### ***Los Angeles***

Pepperdine head coach Gary Colson was nobody's fool. The rules didn't make him keep pace with UCLA, and he certainly wasn't going to force the issue. The Waves slowed the pace in this Sweet 16 game and were within a point with nine minutes to play.

Leite's dominance in the first round win over Memphis was simply a byproduct of a regular season where the 6'10" center produced a 19/10 per-game average. Ollie Matson and Dick Skophammer crashed the boards from the wings and each got nine rebounds apiece. And there was a guard who would go on to considerable NBA success—Dennis Johnson would win championship rings in both Seattle and Boston and ultimately make the Hall of Fame. In 1976, D.J. was knocking down 16ppg for the Waves.

The problem Pepperdine ran into against UCLA was that D.J. was the only player shooting well. Leite struggled to 4-for-14 and the Waves shot 40 percent as a team. The Bruins didn't have their best game, but they still got 34 points and 16 rebounds combined from Marques Johnson and Richard Washington. UCLA finally shook their challenger in the final nine minutes and pulled away, 70-61.

If UCLA-Pepperdine had been a grind, then Arizona-UNLV positively sizzled. The Vegas program had just come into existence in 1970 and the legendary Jerry Tarkanian had just taken over in 1974. Tark immediately started producing, with a 20-victory season, followed by a Sweet 16 run in 1975.

Eddie Owens scored 23ppg from his forward spot for the Runnin' Rebels and guard Sam Smith knocked down 17ppg. UNLV had already beaten Arizona in a high-scoring affair once this season, 98-84. The Rebels had blown out Syracuse and beaten Michigan by 14. UNLV's final

record was 24-1, they scored 100 points or more fourteen times, and ended the season ranked #3 in the country. Had modern-day seeding existed, it's probable that UNLV, rather than UCLA, would have been the #1 seed in the West.

But that win over Arizona had been close and this one was no different. The Wildcats led 51-47 at half and would shoot 58 percent on the night. They got a spectacular game from Herman Harris, who went off for an exquisite 31/9/9 line. The Wildcats might have won comfortably, but—like VMI—they were leaving points on the table at the foul line. Arizona went 26-for-46 from the charity stripe. On the UNLV side, Owens scored 21, Smith hit for 26, and Tark got a huge performance off the bench from Lewis Brown, who posted a 24/16 line. The game went to overtime, tied 103-103.

In the extra five minutes, Arizona finally started hitting their free throws. In fact, all 11 of their overtime points came at the line. That was the difference in a 114-109 thriller.

There were eight teams left.

### **THE REGIONAL FINALS**

Two days later, on Saturday, March 20, were the four games that would decide who was going to Philadelphia.

#### ***East***

The first half of Rutgers-VMI was virtually three different games in of themselves. The Scarlet Knights came out looking ready to put this one to bed early, jumping to a 19-11 lead. Then the Keydets would turn it around and move ahead 27-26. VMI was getting the big game they needed from Will Bynum, who ultimately went off for 34 points and 7 rebounds. Ron Carter added a 15/7 line.

But Rutgers would turn up the heat. The Scarlet Knight defense forced John Krovic into a tough 5-for-19 afternoon and VMI would shoot 43 percent for the game. Meanwhile, Rutgers shot a sizzling 57 percent. Over the final 4 ½ minutes of the first half, the Scarlet Knights played virtually perfect basketball, ripping off a 22-7 run and taking a comfortable 14-point margin into the locker room.

There was no serious pushback in the second half. VMI got as close as ten with eight minutes to go, but never cut the lead into single digits. Mike Dabney would score 23, while Phil Sellers posted a 16/12. But no one was better than Eddie Jordan. With a stat line of 23 points, 4 rebounds, 5 assists, and 6 steals, Jordan's play was exquisite. He was an easy choice for the region's Most Outstanding Player. And Rutgers' undefeated season would continue on to the Final Four.



## **Midwest**

The draw was set up so that Rutgers would play the winner of Michigan-Missouri. The Wolverines took control of the game in the first half and rolled out to a 50-37 lead at intermission. Michigan controlled the low post. John Robinson racked up 21 points/16 rebounds, while Phil Hubbard went for 20/18. That's in addition to Dave Baxter coming off the bench to pop in 18 points, grab five rebounds and dish out four assists. And we haven't even gotten to Ricky Green. Even though the point guard shot 9-for-25, he still led all Wolverine scorers with 23, while handing out seven assists.

But Missouri had Willie Smith. Smith's 14 points in the first half were impressive, but clearly not going to be enough. So he stepped up his game. In the second half, Smith poured in 29 more. He took 35 shots from the floor on the afternoon and made 18 of them. The Tigers wiped out that halftime deficit and then took a 76-71 lead with just under eight minutes to play.

The biggest statistical edge Michigan would have in this game was at the free throw line. The Wolverines got 34 attempts to 22 for the Tigers. And Michigan made better use of their opportunities, outscoring Mizzou at the charity stripe, 25-10. The Wolverines pushed back to the lead, at 79-78 with six minutes to go in this fast-paced battle.

Ultimately, Michigan's balanced lineup was finally able to outpace The Willie Smith Show, pulling out to an 87-80 lead with 2 ½ minutes to go, and then bleeding the clock out for the 95-88 win.

Willie Smith was a deserved winner of the Most Outstanding Player, with one of the great individual performances in tournament history. But it was Michigan that was moving on to the Final Four.

## **Midwest**

The Big Ten team everyone really had their eye on was set for its anticipated 1 vs. 2 battle. Indiana, with a size advantage on Marquette, looked to establish Benson early in the game. The center would score 12 of his 18 points in the first half. After the game, Knight talked of how Marquette being more focused on finesse, as compared to Alabama's muscle, led to reduced hand-fighting down low. Benson used the open space to help the Hoosiers build up a 30-19 lead.

The Warriors would rally. Scott May drew his third foul in the first half and went to the bench. And Earl Tatum was meeting the moment, on his way to a 22-point game and hitting 10 of 15 shots from the floor. Marquette ripped off ten straight points, closed the margin to one and that's how it went to the locker room, at 36-35 Indiana.

What the Hoosier defense was doing though, was controlling the shots the Warriors were getting. Marquette was being forced to settle for long jumpers. That can be a problem in today's game. In the era before the three-point shot, it was really reducing the MU offense to nothing. Tatum wasn't getting help. No other Marquette player scored in double figures. Bo Ellis and

Jerome Whitehead couldn't get good opportunities. Butch Lee shot 4-for-18. And Indiana opened up a ten-point lead midway through the second half.

McGuire's team hadn't come this far to roll over, and they closed the gap to 55-52. May, his play limited by the foul trouble, was the man Knight went to down the stretch. The great forward hit his free throws. Indiana's 57 percent shooting from the floor compared to 38 percent for Marquette was just too much to overcome. The Hoosiers closed out the 65-56 win. Benson was the regional's Most Outstanding Player. For the second time in four years, Knight was taking his program to the Final Four. There were two Big Ten teams and two undefeated teams that would be in Philadelphia.

### **West**

Prior to this season, Arizona had never won a single game in the NCAA Tournament. Now, they were one step from the Final Four. And all that stood in their way was the most powerful dynasty in the history of American sports

Bob Elliot and Al Fleming had been the Wildcat leaders all year, playing down low and combining to average 34 points/22 rebounds. Herman Harris, the hero of the UNLV win, went 6'5" and averaged 11 more. Jim Rappis, a 6'2" guard, provided some scoring punch in the backcourt. After a slow start, Arizona had outpaced the WAC, their conference home until 1978 when they joined UCLA in the Pac-10, to get this opportunity in the NCAA Tournament.

So far, the Wildcats had made most of the opportunity. And for 34 minutes here at Pauley Pavillion, they hung right with the mighty Bruins. Harris continued his solid play in this regional, scoring 18 points. With just over six minutes to play, this game was tied, 58-58.

After the game, the gracious Bartow would speculate that the torrid game Arizona and UNLV had played two nights earlier finally wore the Wildcats down. There's probably something to that, as there was to the UCLA head coach's decision to go to a 2-1-2 zone down the stretch.

Ultimately though, the Bruins had Richard Washington. Their big man went for 22 points/10 rebounds. On the Arizona side, Elliot was a non-factor, at 10/6. Fleming hauled in 16 rebounds and passed for five assists. But his 6-for-17 shooting hindered Wildcat efficiency. The Bruins completely took this game over in the final six minutes and pulled away to an 82-66 win. Washington picked up his MOP trophy. And UCLA picked up their 12<sup>th</sup> Final Four trip in the last 13 years.

## **THE FINAL FOUR: Philadelphia Spectrum**

### **Saturday**

Michigan and Rutgers were the game on the early afternoon undercard. This would be a game that the New York Times would describe afterwards as being shocking—not necessarily because of the winner, but because of how lopsided the game was.

The inside power of the Wolverines was again on display, with John Robinson scoring 20 points and pulling down 16 rebounds, while Hubbard posted a 16/13. The balance of Michigan was again on display, with all five starters in double figures. Green did everything, scoring 16, grabbing six rebounds, and dishing out five assists.

Meanwhile, Rutgers could do nothing. While both teams were sloppy—a combined 54 turnovers, the Scarlet Knights just never got anything going. Michigan was up 46-29 by halftime and it never got close, ending 86-70. Tom Young made no attempt to hide his disappointment in postgame media comments.

In a modern context Young's blunt criticism of his team's play might seem harsh—after all, what's the point of going off on your team in the press when the season (a fabulous season) is now over? But up through 1981, the season didn't end for the losing teams on Semi-Final Saturday. A consolation game was played in the early evening on Monday night. Rutgers couldn't win a national title, but they would be playing either Indiana or UCLA in two days' time.

As to the Hoosiers and Bruins, they were the main event, a classic storyline of the rising force looking to break through, and the old dynasty fighting to hold on to power. But a classic storyline did not make for a classic game. It wasn't a blowout, but if there was any doubt that Indiana was now the better team, this game eliminated it.

The end of the first half and the beginning of the second half were the key swing points. The Hoosier defense locked down in the final 5 ½ minutes before intermission, allowing just two field goals and allowing them to nudge a tight game out to a 34-26 margin. Then, Indiana locked down UCLA scoreless for the first three minutes of the second half. Later on in the second half, the Hoosiers went six more minutes without allowing a basket.

Indiana's defensive play was necessary, because no one had a particularly noteworthy offensive game. Benson posted a 16/9 line, but even shooting from in close, he went 6-for-15. May scored 14, but only made 5 of 16 from the field. Buckner's 12 came at the price of 6-for-14.

The one exception to the rule was Abernethy. The hero of the Alabama game for coming up with the crucial loose ball, he hit 7 of 8 shots against UCLA. And the most dazzling individual stat for anyone wasn't on the scoring front—it was Bobby Wilkerson chewing up 19 rebounds. Indiana was forcing misses and cleaning up the glass. The final score was 65-51. The UCLA dynasty was over. The Indiana undefeated season was just one win away.

## **Monday**

The fans who arrived early were able to watch a high-scoring consolation game between UCLA and Rutgers. The Scarlet Knights acquitted themselves a little better than they had on Saturday, but the Bruins still had too much weaponry and took home third place in a 106-92 game.

Now, it was time for Indiana-Michigan. It hadn't taken long for the new rules allowing more teams per conference to have a big impact and create this Round 3 for the championship. Even

in our own day, when the best conferences routinely get nine or teams into the Dance, rarely do we get an intraconference battle for the national title.

There was Villanova's epic upset of Georgetown in 1985. Three years later, Danny Manning and Kansas upset Oklahoma for the title, a victory aided by the home-neutral advantage that came from the Final Four being in Kansas City that year. That's it. Even if you expand the definition to include teams that have subsequently become conference rivals since playing in the national final, that only adds Maryland-Indiana from 2002.

If the Indiana fans of 1976 had known that history, it might have added to the tension—the underdog won when conference rivals squared off in both 1985 and 1988. In fact, Villanova's historic upset was strongly attributed to the familiarity the Wildcats had gained from playing the Hoyas twice, eliminating much of the intimidation factor. If that was true of Villanova in 1985, how much truer was it for the Michigan of 1976—the team that had already come the closest of anyone to knocking off the Hoosiers.

And the first half did not go well for the unbeaten powerhouse. After his great game on Saturday, Wilkerson was knocked out early on Monday night, suffering a concussion. He would be watching the conclusion for the hospital at Temple University. The Wolverines were getting good games from Greene, who scored 18 points and had six rebounds. And Hubbard continued his own stellar rebounding work in this tournament, pulling down 11 boards. Michigan led 35-29 at the half.

The problem the Wolverines had was that no one was having a truly stellar game. Hubbard could only get eight shots. Robinson didn't have the same kind of dominating performance that had lifted his team past Missouri and Rutgers. No one played poorly, but no one played great. And in a game of this magnitude, somebody usually has to be great.

Indiana had two players that were great, and then played like it in the second half. May scored 26 points and finished with eight rebounds. Benson's final numbers were 25/9. Meanwhile, Buckner was doing a little bit of everything. The point guard did his work running the offense, and he played his usual stellar defense, getting five steals. He added some scoring help, with 16 points. And he went to the boards ,getting eight rebounds.

Indiana's Big Three of May, Benson, and Buckner scored 36 of their team's first 38 points after halftime. The Hoosier attack sizzled. They scored 57 points in the second half—more than UCLA had scored in the entire game against them on Saturday. With seven minutes to go, Hubbard fouled out. It was all over but the shouting, and Indiana finished off perfection with a comfortable 86-68 win.

The perfect season has been vigorously pursued several times since 1976. There was UNLV's run in 1991 and Kentucky in 2015, each of whom reached the national semifinals before losing. Gonzaga made it all the way to Monday night in 2021. Ironically, all three of these teams had to try and close the deal in Indianapolis. But as though something is protecting the legacy of the

1976 Indiana Hoosiers, each team was struck down. As of this writing in January 2023, college basketball still awaits its next perfect season.