



THE NARRATIVE OF THE 1981 NCAA TOURNAMENT

A tournament that started with chaos and ended in excellence



It had been a tumultuous four years for Bob Knight and the Indiana basketball program since their unbeaten national title run of 1976. They missed the NCAA Tournament twice. In 1980, they won a Big Ten title, but lost to archrival Purdue in the NCAAs, then watched both the Boilermakers and Iowa go to the Final Four. But Indiana had all their key pieces back for 1981 and came into the season ranked fifth in the country.

A brilliant sophomore guard named Isiah Thomas keyed the team, with 16ppg and six assists as he ran the floor show. Randy Wittman, a lights-out shooter with an NBA career ahead of him, averaged 10ppg to complete a well-rounded backcourt. Another Thomas—Jim (no relation to Isiah) gave Knight quality minutes as a passer and defender.

The frontcourt was in equally good hands. Ray Tolbert averaged 12 points/6 rebounds per game and won the Chicago Tribune's Silver Basketball Award, which was as close as the Big Ten had to a generally acknowledged MVP in those days. Elevating Tolbert over Isiah in terms of value and impact is pushing it, but the award does underscore Tolbert's ability to control the paint.

Another forward, even more talented, was on the rise. Landon Turner averaged 10ppg, but the junior was coming into his own as the season went on, and emerging as a possible #1 overall NBA draft pick for 1982. Ted Kitchel rounded out the frontcourt, and though he only scored nine points per game, he was another sharpshooter who could space the floor.

But December was a disappointment. They played good teams in Kentucky, Notre Dame and North Carolina, all of whom would be 2-seeds come March. The Hoosiers lost all three. The games were close to be sure—68-66, 68-64 and 65-56 respectively, and the games against the Irish and Tar Heels were on the road. But it didn't suggest a special season in the offing.

A trip to Hawaii between Christmas and New Year's was a disaster, with losses to Clemson and Texas Rio-Grande Valley. Indiana completed non-conference play at 7-5. Forget a national title—in an era when only 48 teams made the NCAA Tournament, the Hoosiers had their hands full just trying to get to the Dance.

Indiana opened up Big Ten play on a stronger note at home, beating Michigan State and Illinois by double digits. The Spartans were on hard times after the departure of Magic Johnson following the 1979 national title run, but the Illini were a contender.

The Hoosiers then dipped again, losing two of three. They dropped an overtime game at Michigan. Another loss came to Iowa. In between these two defeats, Indiana knocked off Ohio State, who was led by future TV analyst Clark Kellogg.

At 3-2 in the Big Ten and 10-7 overall, the moment was urgent for Knight's Hoosiers and they responded with a four-game win streak. Indiana blew out Northwestern, then got a clutch overtime win over Minnesota. IU beat Purdue 69-61 and then blew out Wisconsin to get back in position in the conference race.

A return visit to Purdue ended the win streak. The Boilermakers and first-year head coach Gene Keady were able to pull out a 69-66 win. Indiana responded by winning at Wisconsin and setting up a big game at Iowa on February 19.

Iowa was a program on the rise and they had a head coach who was destined for greatness. Lute Olson took over the basketball program in Iowa City in 1975. Four years later, Olson got the Hawkeyes a piece of the Big Ten title—a crown they shared with Magic Johnson's Michigan State team—and got into the NCAA Tournament. By 1980 they were in the Final Four.

Olson's team was well-balanced. The keys were on the wings with 6'6" swingmen Vince Brookins and Kevin Boyle. Brookins was Iowa's leading scorer at 15ppg. Boyle was a double digit scorer and the two combined for ten rebounds a night. Kenny Arnold was at the point, Steve Kraficisin was a 6'10" bruiser in the paint and both averaged 11 ppg.

The Hawkeyes were tied with the Hoosiers for first place in the Big Ten, each with 9-3 conference records when they met in Iowa City. With sole possession of first place on the line, it was Iowa who stepped up with a 78-65 win.

This game did prove to be a threshold moment in the college basketball season. But it was as an endpoint, marking the end of Iowa's rise and the last appearance of Indiana's inconsistency. It was in these latter stages of February that Knight's '81 Hoosiers began to look like the team history remembers them as.

They beat Minnesota 74-64, took out Ohio State 74-58 and outgunned Michigan 98-83. Iowa held serve, including a win at Purdue that gave the Boilermakers a sixth conference loss and ultimately knocked them out of the NCAA Tournament. Minnesota would also fade from NCAA consideration.

The final week of the regular season opened with Iowa appearing to be in command, still up a game in the league at 13-3 and having winnable road games at Michigan State and Ohio State. Indiana was 12-4, with Illinois giving chase at 11-5.

The Illini were having a breakout year. Lou Henson came to Champaign in 1976 to take over a program whose last Final Four had been in 1952. Henson was poised to make the NCAAs for the first time this season behind the work of two terrific forwards. Eddie Johnson was one of the Big Ten's better players, averaging 17 points/9 rebounds. Mark Smith was another tough player inside, averaging 14/6.

There was no true center or true point guard, but Craig Tucker did provide some scoring help on the perimeter. Illinois had knocked off Missouri and Marquette in December to get their season off to a good start. They were a virtual lock for the NCAA invite that would start a run of nine bids in ten years under Henson. And there was outside hope for a Big Ten title as they met Indiana in what was a virtual elimination game for the conference championship.

But the Hoosiers stood strong on the road with a 69-66 win. When Iowa was upset 71-70 at Michigan State, the Big Ten race was tied.

On the final Saturday of the season—there was no conference tournament played then, so this was the day before Selection Sunday—Iowa went to Ohio State. Kellogg had averaged 17 points/12 rebounds this season and the Buckeyes were no easy out. They completed Iowa's final-week collapse with a 78-70 upset.

The door was open for Indiana to win the Big Ten outright. They were peaking and a Saturday night visit to East Lansing wasn't going to stop them. The Hoosiers took home an easy 69-48 win and a second straight Big Ten title.

It wasn't a great year for the Big Ten. Iowa and Illinois were the only other teams that qualified for the field. But the Hoosiers were coming on strong.

Two years earlier Knight had surprised the basketball world when he successfully recruited Isiah Thomas out of Chicago. DePaul had seemed a more likely destination for the talented young point guard. It's enough to make you wonder how thoroughly the Blue Demons would have dominated college basketball in 1981 *with* Isiah, because they were awfully dominant without him.

These were the halcyon years of basketball at DePaul. Their longtime head coach, Ray Meyer, was producing the best seasons of a tenure that had started here during World War II. Meyer had never won a national title, but he got his first Final Four trip in 1979. In 1980, DePaul was ranked #1 in the country coming into the NCAA Tournament before a Round of 32 upset loss to UCLA did them in. The Blue Demons were looking for vindication.

The lineup was loaded. Mark Aguirre was the eventual #1 pick in the upcoming NBA draft, and the forward averaged 23 points/9 rebounds/5 assists. Aguirre and fellow forward Terry Cummings each had long pro careers ahead of them. Cummings was good for 13/9 per night.

DePaul's backcourt of Skip Dillard and Clyde Bradshaw didn't produce the same type of NBA careers that Aguirre and Cummings did, but as college players, Dillard and Bradshaw were an excellent guard combo. They were both double-digit scorers, they could both scoop up a few rebounds and Bradshaw averaged seven assists per game.

The Blue Demons met all comers. They knocked off defending national champion Louisville. DePaul got a small measure of payback against UCLA. Only a mysterious one-point loss at home to Old Dominion—a team that ended the season 18-10 and out of the NCAAs—marred DePaul's record.

This was a time when basketball among the Catholic universities of the Midwest was at its peak—DePaul, Notre Dame and Marquette were all independents and had lively rivalries with each other. All three made Final Fours in the late 1970s and Marquette won it all in 1977. The Warriors didn't make this 1981 field, but they stayed in contention for a bid to the very end. And Notre Dame was in the national elite with high hopes for the coming March.

Digger Phelps was on a roll in South Bend. Ending UCLA's 88-game winning streak in 1974 gave the Irish basketball program momentum and they reeled off a string of four straight Sweet 16 trips. 1978 had been their Final Four year, a trip made even sweeter when they hammered DePaul in the regional final. Notre Dame went back to the final eight in 1979 before running into the machine that was Magic and Michigan State. The Irish saw their streak of Sweet 16s end in 1980 with a Round of 32 loss to Missouri, but Notre Dame still came into that tournament as a 4-seed.

Kelly Tripucka was the best player for the Irish, an 18ppg scorer. Tripucka was one of three good forwards, the others being Orlando Woolridge and Tracy Jackson. John Paxson, who one day would hit one of the most famous shots in the history of the NBA Finals, was running the floor at the point.

Notre Dame's regular season wasn't dominant. They lost at UCLA. They lost at Marquette when Glenn "Doc" Rivers hit a halfcourt shot at the buzzer. The Irish lost at San Francisco. This wasn't a terrible loss—the Dons were a good team that we'll see more of in this narrative. But it was a game that a team with national title aspirations should win.

A regular season that was more about consistency than dominance did see wins over NCAA-bound teams in Maryland and Villanova. And it saw the game that was the defining moment of this entire regular season in college basketball.

The University of Virginia started playing basketball in 1906. A mere seventy years later they got their first bid to the NCAA Tournament. That 1976 NCAA invite came in the first year under new head coach Terry Holland. Prior to the 1980 season, Holland made the recruiting land of a lifetime—he got Ralph Sampson to come to Charlottesville.

A freak of nature at 7-foot-4, the lanky Sampson immediately became an attraction. While some of his initial marketing appeal had a bit of P.T. Barnum and The Greatest Showman in it—we all wanted to see just what a 7'4" man *looked* like, everyone stayed for the basketball. Sampson immediately led Virginia to the NIT title in his freshman year of 1980. The Cavs were ranked #8 in the country coming into this 1981 season.

They more than lived up to the unusually high expectations. Sampson averaged 18/12 and was an All-American. Jeff Lamp, an underrated swingman added 18ppg himself and provided quality perimeter shooting. Lee Raker was a good contributor from the forward spot. The backcourt wasn't great, but it didn't stop Virginia from winning their first 22 games.

Now ranked #1 in the polls, the Cavs were slated for a non-conference game with Notre Dame on February 22. The game was a nominal road trip for UVA, played in Chicago's Rosemont Horizon, which normally hosted DePaul.

The culture of college basketball was very different in 1981. Regular season games mattered. Even between two teams guaranteed to be in the NCAA Tournament, as Virginia and Notre Dame assuredly were by this point. Virginia's quest for an undefeated season was a big story and with memories of Notre Dame's upending of Bill Walton and UCLA just seven years earlier still fresh, this game had been one people were pointing to. NBC, with their fantastic broadcast team of Dick Enberg, Al McGuire and Billy Packer, was on hand.

The Sunday afternoon telecast was everything NBC could have wanted. Virginia appeared to have won, ahead 56-55 with five seconds left. All the Cavs needed to do was inbound the ball underneath their own basket, hit a couple free throws and go home. But the Irish defense forced an improbable five-second violation. Notre Dame had one more chance.

Virginia almost returned the favor and forced a five-second violation of their own before the Irish got a time out just in time. When the ball did get inbounded, a missed shot in the lane appeared to again seal the Cavs' win. The ball was bouncing toward the right corner as the final seconds ticked down.

Woolridge ran it down and in desperation quickly turned and fired. Swish. Virginia's unbeaten season was gone. The magic of Notre Dame was reinforced.

Virginia returned to Charlottesville to try and take care of business in what was a typically competitive ACC. The Cavs immediately lost a road game at Wake Forest. While they could be taken as Virginia being deflated after the Notre Dame game, it could also be taken as Wake pretty darn good.

The Demon Deacons were on track for their first NCAA Tournament trip since making the regional finals in 1977. Carl Tacy, now in his ninth year in Winston-Salem, had a talented guard in Frank Johnson who averaged 16 points and six assists per game. Jim Johnston anchored the post and the 6'11" center averaged a 12/6. Alvis Rodgers, Mike Helm and Guy Morgan could all contribute on the scoring front and all—especially Morgan—went to the boards.

Wake Forest got as high as #3 in the country in January. They knocked off North Carolina twice in three tries, one of them an early season game that didn't count in the conference standings. Three losses in their last four games took the Demon Deacons out of the race for the ACC crown, but they were still a threat when the conference tournament began.

Maryland was another team coming to the ACC Tournament in Washington D.C. with high hopes. A team that had virtually no basketball history when Lefty Driesell arrived in 1970, the Terps had come "thisclose" to making the splash of all splashes. Driesell had successfully recruited center Moses Malone. Destined for the Hall of Fame, Malone was one of the greatest rebounders of all time. He was the kind of player you win a national championship with, especially in an era when even the best college players typically stayed 2-3 years.

But the pros—the American Basketball Association—came calling. Moses liked the money more than he liked the idea of Maryland and he ended up turning pro at the tender age of 18. Driesell's hopes of a major national impact were gone, at least temporarily.

Lefty did have an awfully good team in 1981. Albert King and Buck Williams were a potent duo at the forward spot and combined to average 34 points/18 rebounds per game. Earnest Graham, a 6'7" senior was versatile, posting a stat line of 15/6/4, and Greg Manning knocked down 14 a game in the backcourt.

Maryland had high expectations coming into the season, ranked #4 in the polls. By those standards, the regular season was a disappointment—17-8 and an 8-6 record in league play. But the Terps were primed to get an NCAA bid and they still had the ACC Tournament ahead.

Virginia, Maryland and Wake Forest were all relatively new players as far as playing contending basketball goes. The same could not be said of the fourth team in the ACC mix. North Carolina was every bit the blueblood basketball program then that they are today. Since Dean Smith's arrival in Chapel Hill in 1962, the Tar Heels had made five Final Fours. Smith won an Olympic gold medal in 1976.

But Smith came into 1981 on what was, at least for him, a down note. We can trace it back to 1977. The Tar Heels were in the NCAA title game against Marquette, ahead by eight points in the second half. With no shot clock to protect him from overcoaching, Smith went into a stall and voluntarily broke his own team's momentum. Marquette took over and won 67-59.

North Carolina continued to play at an elite level for the next three years, but March had become cruel. Three straight years had seen the Heels fail to get out of the first weekend.

There was no shortage of talent on hand for 1981. Al Wood, the 6'6" senior was the team's focal point, averaging an 18/6 line. From the perspective of history, we know that freshman Sam Perkins and sophomore James Worthy would turn out even better. And even from the perspective of 1981 knowledge, we know they combined to average 29/16. Jimmy Black was a capable point guard that brought it all together.

In a difficult non-conference schedule, North Carolina got the aforementioned win at Indiana. They beat eventual NCAA teams in Georgetown and Arkansas. Being swept by Virginia in conference play doomed any league title hopes, but one of those defeats was a one-point heartbreaker. UNC still finished a solid second in the conference.

The ACC's four favorites all won their quarterfinal games at the Capital Centre and set up an exciting afternoon of semifinals on the Saturday before Selection Sunday. In an outcome no one was expecting, Maryland hammered Virginia 85-62. The Cavs were still expected to be a 1-seed in the following day's bracket, but it certainly wasn't the way Holland wanted to go into NCAA play.

With the favorite gone, North Carolina stepped up—barely. The Tar Heels nipped the Demon Deacons 58-57 in the other semifinal, then escaped Maryland 61-60 in the championship game. The ACC would have two teams—North Carolina and Virginia—primed for high seeds, with Wake and Maryland being viable Final Four dark horses.

Kentucky was built around the talents of 7'1" Sam Bowie, who averaged 17/9. Bowie essentially carried a lineup that included a good point guard in Dirk Minniefield. But the 'Cats lacked depth and they were young—Bowie was a freshman and Minniefield a sophomore.

Even allowing that this was Kentucky, the decision by the AP voters to rank the Wildcats #1 in the preseason poll is a curious one. Since Kentucky's national title run of 1978, they had missed the Dance entirely in 1979 and were bounced in the Sweet 16 in 1980. There was no real depth in the lineup being Bowie and Minniefield.

But Kentucky came out in December and won three straight big games over Ohio State, Indiana and Kansas. The Wildcats beat NCAA-bound Alabama-Birmingham. A loss to Notre Dame finally tripped Kentucky up before they reeled off a 15-3 run through the SEC.

But it wasn't the Wildcats that were the powers of the Southeastern Conference. That honor belonged to LSU and the Tiger rise was something you could see coming. 1973 was when Dale Brown took over a program that had produced Pete Maravich in the late 1960s, but never a consistent winner.

In 1979, Brown won LSU's first outright conference title since 1953 and made the Sweet 16. In 1980, even though LSU finished behind Kentucky in the league race, the Tigers made it all the way to the Elite Eight before falling to Louisville.

All of Brown's key players were back for a 1981 run. Rudy Macklin was a big-time player who averaged 16/10 to lead the way from his forward position. Howard Carter was another 16ppg scorer at the two-guard spot. Ethan Martin was a skilled point guard, providing senior leadership, and he could score. Greg Cook knocked bodies around in the low post. To this returning core group, Brown added freshman power forward Leonard Mitchell, who immediately stepped in with an 11/7 per-game average.

History gives us all perfect vision, but given what LSU had coming back and the trajectory they were on, it's hard to fathom why they weren't the SEC team that the pollsters were in love with. The Tigers were only ranked #12 to begin the season.

LSU went up to the Great Alaska Shootout to start the season, an event that was once a signature part of college basketball's non-conference schedule. The Tigers played two NCAA-bound teams in Arkansas and Georgetown and split. By the time they lost again, they had barreled through the rest of the non-conference, the first 17 SEC games and gotten as high as #2 in the polls. A two-point loss at Kentucky in the season finale didn't affect LSU's outright SEC championship.

The Wildcats and Tigers weren't the only SEC teams with the potential to do some damage in March. Tennessee was led by Don DeVoe, a protégé of Bob Knight who had the Volunteer program in a good place. DeVoe took over in 1979 and promptly made the NCAA field. He got back in 1980 and successfully advanced.

Now it was 1981, and Tennessee had three really good players. Dale Ellis, with a good NBA career in his future, was the best. A 6'7" sophomore guard at a time when bigger backcourt players weren't common, Ellis knocked down 18ppg and grabbed six rebounds. Howard Wood, a 6'7" senior produced a 14/7 and Gary Carter knocked down 15 a night in the backcourt.

Tennessee beat BYU and their electric point guard, Danny Ainge. The Vols went to a holiday tournament in New Orleans and beat Pac-10 contender Arizona State. As a footnote, Tennessee also beat Duke down in New Orleans. The Blue Devils were starting over under a new head coach by the name of Mike Krzyzewski.

The Vols weren't on par with Kentucky or LSU in the conference race, losing all four games against the SEC's best and finishing 12-6 in the league. But Tennessee wasn't far off. Two of those losses to the 'Cats and Tigers were by one point. If you were looking for a team that could slip under the radar in this NCAA Tournament, Tennessee fit the profile. They had a clear star player in Ellis, were well-coached, had been tested by a good schedule and come close to knocking off the country's best.

When the SEC Tournament convened in Birmingham, LSU, Kentucky and Tennessee were all safely in the NCAA Tournament field. And they all played like it. The Wildcats and Vols were immediately bounced in the quarterfinals. LSU fell in the semis. The door was open for someone to play their way into the NAAs.

That someone would be Ole Miss. Bob Weltlich was another Knight guy, now in his fourth year with the Rebels. After losing five of their first six conference games, Ole Miss had started to show signs of life, winning seven of the last twelve. They had a great college player in 6'5" senior Elston Turner, who went for 21 points and eight rebounds per game. Carlos Clark was a productive sophomore who knocked down 14ppg. It was enough star power to make the Rebels a threat for a short burst.

Ole Miss had already beaten Tennessee once during their late season push. The Rebels did it again in the quarterfinals. They took advantage of Kentucky's loss by blowing out Vanderbilt in the semis. The final was against Georgia and their explosive small forward Dominique Wilkins. In a win-or-go-home spot for both teams, Ole Miss pulled it out 66-62 and gave the SEC their unexpected fourth team in the NCAA bracket.

The Pac-10 had a similar profile to the SEC in 1981. There were three viable contenders for the NCAA Tournament. The trio included—but was not highlighted—by the traditional blueblood. Unlike the SEC, the Pac-10 did not play a conference tournament so there was no possibility of a surprise fourth team playing their way in.

Memories of UCLA's glory years under John Wooden were still fresh. Wooden won his last national title in 1975 and rode off into retirement. Now, memories of Wooden were helping chase off coaches. Gene Bartow made a Final Four in 1976, but opted to leave. Gary Cunningham won 50 games over a two-year stretch, but never even made the Final Four. Larry Brown, after a mediocre regular season in 1980, caught fire in March and made it all the way to the national title game before falling to Louisville. Brown promptly went off to the NBA and the New Jersey Nets.

Larry Farmer took the hot seat in Westwood. Farmer had played for Wooden during the dynasty run and he knew the expectations. And he had a pretty good team to work with. Mike Sanders led the way at small forward with a 15/7 average and was reliably supported by power forward Darren Daye and a backcourt of Kenny Fields and Rod Foster, all of whom were double digit scorers. The Bruins were ranked #6 to start the season.

An early loss to DePaul was made up for by a sweep of what was then a home-and-home series with Notre Dame. But in league play, UCLA had a couple of bad losses to Stanford and USC. The Bruins comfortably made the NCAA field, but there were two other teams who eclipsed them in the Pac-10.

Oregon State had a respectable basketball tradition. Slats Gill coached the Beavers for thirty-six seasons and made three Final Fours. The most recent was 1963, although when the coach of your last Final Four team sounds like he came out of a Damon Runyon story, you know it's been a while.

Ralph Miller had been coaching in Corvallis since 1971. He won the Pac-10 title in 1980 and got a 2-seed in the NCAA field. But an upset in the Round of 32 brought that Beavers' season to a premature end. Oregon State, like DePaul out in the Midwest, came into this new season with all their key players back and hoping for some redemption in March.

Steve Johnson was the anchor, a burly 6'10" center who averaged 21/8. Mark Radford and Ray Blue were reliable scorers on the wings. Lester Connor didn't score much, but the point guard distributed the ball and rebounded well from his backcourt spot. Oregon State knocked off BYU to start the season. Then the Beavers simply started blasting their way through the Pac-10 schedule. They swept UCLA. They won at Arizona State. They were riding high at 26-0 as they got set to host the Sun Devils for the regular season finale.

Ned Wulk had what was his best team in a long career at Arizona State. Wulk took over a dead program back in 1958. An up-and-down run over 23 years had at least seen the Sun Devils get to three regional finals, including as recently as 1975. But this 1981 team had the potential to do much more.

Three players had big NBA futures ahead. Alton Lister, the seven-foot center who averaged 15/10, would be a key part of consistent playoff teams with the Milwaukee Bucks. Fat Lever, the point guard whose stat line read 12/5/5 had an even better run with the Denver Nuggets. Lister and Lever alone would have marked 1981 Arizona State as a really good college team. But now let's throw in Byron Scott, the leading scorer at 16ppg, and eventual starter on the great Los Angeles Lakers' teams of the 1980s.

Nor did the talent end here. Sam Williams was a good college power forward who averaged 13/7 and Johnny Nash provided more rebounding help. Arizona State might have been off the radar and unranked to start the season, but they would make their mark.

It started in their own holiday tournament when ASU hosted and beat Iowa and Kansas State, the latter another team headed for the NCAA field. Arizona State knocked off Ohio State. Even though they had the previously mentioned loss to Tennessee, the Sun Devils were up to #13 in the polls when Pac-10 play opened.

Even though ASU lost the league opener to Oregon State in a close 71-67 decision, they won 15 of their next 16, with a split against UCLA. The Pac-10 title was decided when the Sun Devils went to Oregon State to end the regular season.

Arizona State simply blasted Oregon State, 87-67. If the Sun Devils wanted to make a statement, beating an undefeated team by twenty on the road and getting to #3 in the final polls would be the way to do it. If a doubter was looking for reasons to be skeptical of the Beavers entering NCAA play, they too had their ammunition.

The Western Athletic Conference was almost on a par with the Pac-10 when it came to basketball in the West. The WAC produced a lively three-team race and the best player in the country.

BYU, off of consecutive trips to the Round of 32, was led by Danny Ainge. While Ainge would eventually make his professional legacy as a championship player and executive with the Boston Celtics, the big story in 1981 was that he planned to pursue a major league baseball career after he left BYU. The property of the Toronto Blue Jays, Ainge poured in 24ppg for the Cougars this season and beat out Sampson for National Player of the Year honors.

BYU's lineup looks like a glimpse into the future of the 1980s Celtics roster. Greg Kite and Fred Roberts would each join Ainge in Boston. Roberts was a terrific power forward, going 6'10" and averaging 19/8. Kite held down the center spot and got nine rebounds a night. Steve Trumbo rounded out a big front line at 6'8" and hit the boards to the tune of eleven rebounds a game. Even though BYU had those non-conference losses to Oregon State and Tennessee, they also picked up a nice win over Illinois.

Utah, after making a couple Final Fours during the 1960s, were dry for most of the 1970s. Jerry Pimm oversaw a revival in the latter part of the decade with three straight NCAA trips from 1977-79. Even though the Utes missed the NCAA field in 1980, they brought back an exceptionally good frontline of their own.

Tom Chambers' career as one of the NBA's top scoring forwards got its start here with his 19 points/9 rebounds performance for Utah in 1981. Danny Vranes went for 18/8 and Karl Bankowski produced a 13/5 average. Chambers, Vranes and Bankowski were on the short list of any conversation regarding the nation's best frontcourts. Utah got a win at Louisville to key a 9-1 start that put them in the national rankings when the WAC schedule began.

There was no indicator that Wyoming was going to have a big year. The Cowboys had a good program through the 1940s and 1950s, a run that included a national championship in 1943. But there had only been two NCAA appearances since 1958.

Charles Bradley led the way for this Wyoming team, scoring 19ppg from his two-guard spot. He had good help from the forwards, Bill Garnett and Ken Ollie, who combined to average 24/16.

It was Utah who controlled the conference race much of the way, with a 13-1 start and getting into the national top 10. Wyoming, with an overall record of 15-5 had to be considered iffy for making the NCAA field.

The final week of February saw Wyoming host both BYU and Utah. The Cowboys won both games. Utah also lost to BYU. By the time the dust had settled, it was the Utes and Cowboys in a tie for first with the Cougars a game behind. There was no conference tournament. All three would be in good position on Selection Sunday.

Back in December, it was a fair question if Louisville would even get a chance to win a second straight national championship. Come to think of it, you had to be an extreme optimist. Even though the Cardinals were ranked third in the nation to start the season, they were a disaster out of the gate. Louisville lost to good teams like Maryland, Kansas State and Utah. They lost to great teams like DePaul. They lost to so-so teams like Tulsa, Oklahoma State and Minnesota. Nine games into the season, Louisville was staring at a 2-7 record.

But Denny Crum always scheduled tough non-conference games for his team, the better to be prepared for what was a mediocre Metro Conference. Louisville might have lost their star guard Darrell Griffith from the national championship team, but they still had a talented and athletic group of forwards. Derek Smith was the best, averaging 16/8. The McCray brothers, Rodney and Scooter, combined to get 13 rebounds a night. Jerry Eaves was a 14 ppg scorer in the backcourt.

Louisville recovered and coasted through the Metro. By Selection Sunday, the Cardinals were back in the conversation about potential Final Four teams.

THE BRACKET

Selection Sunday was March 8. NBC was the prime network for college basketball and unveiled the bracket. Below is how it broke down. With 48 teams, three are listed on each line—the first-round matchup scheduled to take place on Thursday/Friday, followed by the team with the bye that would play the winner in the Round of 32 on Saturday/Sunday.

EAST REGIONAL

- (8)Houston vs (9) Villanova – (1) Virginia
- (5)Virginia Commonwealth vs (12)Long Island – (4)Tennessee
- (6)BYU vs (11)Princeton – (3)UCLA
- (7)Georgetown vs (10)James Madison – (2)Notre Dame

The Selection Committee didn't shy away from setting up some potential high-profile rematches. UCLA and Notre Dame were in line to play for the third time this season in the Sweet 16. And that Virginia-Notre Dame battle from February? The Cavs and Irish were the chalk to meet in the Elite Eight.

WEST REGIONAL

(8)Kansas State vs (9)San Francisco – (1)Oregon State
(5)Wyoming vs (12)Howard – (4)Illinois
(6)Fresno State vs (11)Northeastern – (3)Utah
(7)Idaho vs (10)Pitt – (2)North Carolina

A potential Sweet 16 battle between Utah and North Carolina would feature two of the nation's best frontcourts. More intriguing was the fact that the regionals were slated for Salt Lake City—right in the Utes' backyard. Utah was one of two teams on the 3-line that stood to reap the benefits of home cooking if they survived their Round of 32 game.

MIDEAST REGIONAL

(8)Creighton vs (9)St. Joseph – (1)DePaul
(5)Boston College vs (12)Ball State – (4)Wake Forest
(6)Maryland vs (11)UT-Chattanooga – (3)Indiana
(7)UAB vs (10)Western Kentucky – (2)Kentucky

The Mideast regionals were slated for Bloomington. It's a sign of how much the NCAA Tournament has grown over the years that Assembly Hall—which wouldn't even be considered to host opening weekend play today—got to host a regional. It's also a sign of how common giving home court advantage was back then. The Hoosiers stood to host two higher-seeded teams if they got out of the first weekend and DePaul's pathway to the Final Four promised to be difficult sledding.

MIDWEST REGIONAL

(8)Lamar vs (9)Missouri – (1)LSU
(5)Arkansas vs (12)Mercer – (4)Louisville
(6)Wichita vs (11)Southern – (3)Iowa
(7)Kansas vs (10)Ole Miss – (2)Arizona State

Iowa's rough ending to the season only got rougher. Their first game was slotted in Wichita, which would be a true road game if the chalk held. And Arizona State had to be considered the best-regarded #2 seed in the bracket with the way they had finished the season. Homecourt would also be a factor in the regionals—LSU could play close to home in New Orleans if they took care of business on the first weekend.

It was time to play the games.

THE FIRST ROUND

Thursday, March 12

It hadn't been a stellar year for the Big Eight, with no one seeded on any of the top six lines. Missouri and Kansas State went to the wire for the regular season title and both were in action on Thursday night.

Norm Stewart was now a fixture on the Missouri sideline. Stewart started with next to nothing in 1968 and within five years was winning 20-plus games each season. By 1976 he had reached a regional final. His teams had shown an ability to peak in March, notably a surprise run through the Big Eight tournament to get an NCAA bid with a losing record in 1978. And a year earlier, Stewart's Tigers upset Notre Dame and got to the Sweet 16.

Mizzou was built around 6'11" sophomore center Steve Stipanovich. By the time Stipanovich left Columbia he was regarded highly enough to be the second overall pick in the NBA draft. As a sophomore with the Tigers he was solid, good for 13 points/7 rebounds per game.

He was surrounded by two exceptional forwards. Curtis Berry at power forward averaged 13/7 and Ricky Frazier at small forward went for 16/7. Jon Sundvold was a nice outside shooter. Missouri had a well-balanced lineup and opened the season #11 in the country.

But they lost their signature non-conference games—the season opener to Arkansas, a blowout loss to traditional rival Illinois and a loss at Louisville in January. The conference schedule was a little more welcoming and the Tigers were 9-4 in league play entering the season finale at home against Kansas State.

The Wildcats had reached three Elite Eights under Jack Hartman in the 1970s, but never the Final Four. Their 1981 edition was led by Rolando Blackman, a good senior forward that would be among the first ten players chosen in the upcoming NBA draft. Blackman went 6'6", had a nice outside shot and averaged 15/5 .

K-State's front line wasn't big, but they could bang. Randy Reed and Ed Nealy were often outsized, at 6'7" each, but they combined to get 14 rebounds a night and each were double-digit scorers. Tyrone Adams was 6'6" and played in the backcourt. The balanced height of the Wildcats was something you would see more often in today's game than was the case in 1981.

Kansas State fared a little better in the non-conference slate than Missouri had. The Wildcats nipped Arkansas by a point in a game at Kansas City and knocked off Louisville right after the New Year. Mixed in were losses to Arizona State and Indiana. Kansas State also went 9-4 in the Big Eight, setting up the winner-take-all-showdown on the final Saturday of the regular season.

Missouri pulled out a 46-43 win and took home what was the second in a run of four straight outright conference titles. The Selection Committee wasn't impressed—when the Tigers failed to win their league tournament they ended up a 9-seed. But their height and balance could make Missouri a dangerous opponent for LSU on Saturday.

Except a guard named Mike Olliver from Lamar got in the way. Firing away from long-range, even with no three-point line in play, Olliver hit 11 of 18 shots and scored 25 points. It was enough to deliver a 71-67 win. Even though the Cardinals were the higher seeded team, Dale Brown had to feel like he caught at least a small break.

The first half of Kansas State's game out west didn't start much better. The Wildcats were in a nine-point hole against San Francisco by halftime. It was Reed who stepped up. He finished the game with 24 points and pulled K-State even as the clock neared the two-minute mark. A Blackman putback finally gave Kansas State the lead and they preserved a 64-60 win. That tough, but undersized front line would get a crack at Steve Johnson and Oregon State on Saturday.

The biggest rout of the first night was delivered by Wyoming in the West Regional's other game. The Cowboys held Howard to 27 percent shooting from the floor and cleaned up the misses to the tune of a 45-28 edge in rebounding. Wyoming won 78-43 and punched their ticket to play Illinois.

Maryland had some momentum from their strong play in the ACC Tournament. The Terps looked like they might give it away when they trailed UT-Chattanooga 41-39 at the half. But the combo of Albert King and Buck Williams was too much. King finished with 25, Williams hauled in 16 rebounds and Maryland pulled away to win 85-69. The sixth-seeded Terps advanced to meet Indiana.

It was the Mideast's other game that produced more drama. A couple of Catholic universities, St. Joe's and Creighton met on the floor of another Catholic university—Dayton was the host. In a good basketball game, St. Joe's was carried by two players. John Smith and Terry Costner combined to score 38 points and get 21 rebounds.

In a 57-57 tie, the Hawks got the ball to Costner. He drew the foul and went to the line with three seconds left. Costner hit both free throws. St. Joe's win was exciting, and now they were set to be devoured by DePaul. So it was thought.

The drama in the East Regional at Providence was more before the games than after. Danny Ainge woke up that morning with back spasms. Two hours prior to tipoff, he was ordered not to play. Ainge played anyway. He scored 21 points and BYU beat Princeton 60-51. Ainge's health would be the key topic in the run-up to a BYU-UCLA game on Saturday that seemed out of place being played in Rhode Island.

Arkansas was in the midst of a veritable golden age of basketball. In six short years, Eddie Sutton turned an unaccomplished program into one that now had five straight NCAA bids, a Final Four trip in 1978, and an Elite Eight appearance in 1979 where they nearly upset Larry Bird's Indiana State.

The '81 Razorbacks weren't quite on that level. But ranked #20 in the preseason, they went up to Alaska and beat Missouri and LSU right off the rip before losing the final of that tournament to North Carolina. Weaknesses showed in losses at mediocre Michigan, to Kansas State and then a 2-3 start in the old Southwest Conference.

Arkansas was in a tough race for the SWC title against Houston. The Cougars, who would play their first NCAA game on Friday night, had a front line that included Michael Young, Larry Micheaux and a freshman named Clyde Drexler. Those forwards combined for 32 points and 24 boards a night. And none of them—not even the future Hall of Famer Drexler—were the best player on the team. That honor went to Rob Williams who poured in 25ppg from the backcourt.

The Razorbacks didn't have that level of talent, but Scott Hastings was a good center, Darrell Walker provided some talent and athleticism on the wings and U.S. Reed was in the backcourt. Arkansas won the regular season title, while Houston captured the league tournament.

Arkansas' good non-conference schedule got them the 5-seed and the date with Mercer in the first round. Hastings' 18/12 night keyed a rebounding advantage for the Hogs, which helped them gain control of a tight game in the final seven minutes and win 73-67. Arkansas would get a crack at Louisville.

As for Houston, they didn't survive this opening round. But that frontline—about to be supplemented by incoming freshman Akeem Olajuwon—was on the verge of helping define college basketball in the upcoming seasons.

Speaking of teams waiting on an incoming freshman center who would define college basketball—Georgetown fits that description even better. When John Thompson took over in 1973, the Hoyas hadn't made an impact since reaching the national final thirty years earlier. Thompson had them in the NAAs by his third season and just last year they had come within a point of the Final Four.

This Georgetown team was young and not particularly tall. Craig Shelton, who went 6'7", was the top frontcourt player and averaged 16/8. John Duren and Steve Martin were reliable scorers and rebounders on the wings. And a future NBA All-Star, Eric "Sleepy" Floyd was a freshman, who was good for 16 a night. Floyd, with his deep range, would have been even more deadly with the three-point shot.

The Hoyas had nice wins over Maryland and Indiana and had gone 18-4 on the season. But against James Madison on this night, Georgetown struggled and shot 44 percent. JMU hit 54 percent from the floor and won 61-55. James Madison would play Notre Dame. Georgetown would anxiously await the arrival of Patrick Ewing on campus.

So at the end of the first night, we have the following Round of 32 matchups set. Note that the Mideast Regional has its bracket split, with Saturday's winners on opposite sides of the upcoming regionals. Otherwise, the winners of these games will play each other in the Sweet 16.

East: UCLA-BYU, Notre Dame-James Madison

Mideast: DePaul-St. Joe's, Indiana-Maryland

Midwest: LSU-Lamar, Louisville-Arkansas

West: Oregon State-Kansas State, Illinois-Wyoming.

Friday, March 13

Houston might be a team of the very near future, but they ran into a buzzsaw against Villanova on Friday night in Charlotte. Rollie Massimino's Wildcats had been to an Elite Eight as recently as 1978. This season they had wins over NCAA-bound opponents in Boston College, San Francisco and St. Joe's. But there were also losses to mediocre opposition—to crosstown rival LaSalle and twice to St. John's. There was the thirty-point beatdown Villanova took at the hands of Notre Dame. All of which made the Big East's conference tournament that much more important.

The league tourney was played in Syracuse, not yet prestigious enough to be at its current venue of Madison Square Garden. Villanova got a couple wins in the Carrier Dome, but a tight three-point loss to Syracuse in the final looked like it might cost them a bid.

But the Big East was only in its second year of existence and not yet eligible for an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. Syracuse was left at home. Villanova was chosen. And the 'Cats made the most of their chance. Burly 6'8" sophomore John Pinone, the team's leading scorer and rebounder all season, posted a 19/10. Alex Bradley, a swingman who could both score and rebound, went for 22 points.

Villanova shot 67 percent from the floor and cruised to a 90-72 win. It was a performance that surely left Terry Holland and Virginia feeling a bit uncomfortable as they looked ahead to Sunday.

The best team in the Big East all season long had been Boston College. The Eagles went 18-5 and edged out Georgetown to win the regular season title. An upset loss in the quarterfinals of the league tournament likely cost BC a first-round bye. On the same side of the Mideast Regional bracket as DePaul, the Eagles had some serious potential to do damage.

NCAA Tournament games are often driven by great point guard play and Boston College had one of the best. Sophomore John Bagley was a 20ppg scorer and eventually went on to play for the hometown Celtics in the NBA. Nor did Bagley have to be a one-man band. Dwan Chandler could take some of the scoring pressure off in the backcourt. And third-year coach Tom Davis brought in two good freshman forwards. Martin Clark and Jay Murphy each went 6'9" and combined for 19/9 each night.

The Eagles got everything they could handle from Ball State. The Cardinals had an electric little sophomore point guard of their own. Ray McCallum only went 5'9", but he poured in 18ppg. With McCallum and Bagley leading the way for their respective teams, Boston College and Ball State both lit up the scoreboard down in Tuscaloosa. The difference was that BC hit the boards and their 43-26 edge on the glass was decisive. An under-the-radar player in Joe Beaulieu for the Eagles was the quiet hero with 11 rebounds.

Boston College's 93-90 win set up a date with Wake Forest. It had still been a good season for Ball State, who finished second in the MAC before winning the conference tournament. It was a good enough season that Cardinal coach Steve Yoder turned it into the Wisconsin job two years later. Yoder and Davis would see more of each other in the Big Ten after the latter eventually left BC for Iowa.

The West Regional's games were being played in El Paso, but they also had a distinctly Eastern flair, with Pitt and Northeastern on the slate. The Panthers were far better known for their football success. The school won a national title in 1976 behind the running of Tony Dorsett and the current football team was a national contender with Dan Marino at quarterback, fresh off finishing #2 in the nation in 1980.

Basketball was a harder sell in western Pennsylvania. The program had snuck into an Elite Eight back in 1974, but that was an anomaly in an otherwise non-descript history. The Panthers were not yet a part of the Big East and rookie head coach Roy Chipman labored in the East Coast Athletic Association (more or less the teams of today's Atlantic 10).

Pitt lost five straight early-season games. Even allowing the losses included UAB and James Madison, there wasn't a lot of reason for anyone to get excited. But Chipman had a tough power forward in Sam Clancy. A part of a national team that won the gold medal at the 1979 Pan American Games with Bob Knight, Clancy averaged 16/11 for the '81 Panthers. His physicality also drew the eye of NFL scouts and he actually ended up lasting ten years as a pass rusher in the NFL.

Clancy got help in the backcourt from Carlton Neverson, who knocked down 15ppg. Pitt gradually got their stuff together. In the ECAC Tournament, they beat both of the league's regular season co-champs, Rhode Island and Duquesne, to pick up the NCAA invite.

Northeastern had a young head coach that the college basketball world would soon get very familiar with—Jim Calhoun, who took over a program that was reinstated in 1973 after a nearly thirty-year absence. This NCAA bid was the start of a run that saw the Huskies make the Dance five times in six years and get Calhoun on the radar of UConn, where he went on to win three national championships and make the Hall of Fame.

Calhoun also had a fabulous backcourt, with Pete Harris and Perry Moss combining for nearly forty points a game. Even though both guards were small, they still went to the boards. Up and down the lineup, Northeastern rebounded better than their size would indicate. They needed a pair of overtime wins, over Vermont and Holy Cross—the latter on a 52-foot buzzer-beater by Moss—to get this NCAA ticket and they wouldn't go quietly.

Both games in El Paso were heart-stoppers. Clancy scored 22 points for Pitt in a battle against Idaho that went to overtime. The Panthers trailed 69-68. With three seconds left, Dwayne Wallace scored the last of his 20 points by underhanding a line drive shot into the basket from 12 feet about. Pitt escaped 70-69

Northeastern and Fresno State played at a slower tempo, but they executed well and each team shot close to 60 percent from the floor. This one was tied 53-all. Moss drove the lane, drew the defense and dumped the ball off to forward Chip Rucker who laid it in with four seconds left for the win.

Harris had been brilliant, playing all forty minutes and scoring 24 points. Northeastern had gotten some unwelcome attention earlier in the week when Al McGuire said they were not only the worst team in this year's field, but that they would finish last in the Big Ten. As it was, Northeastern was making what would be the first of two straight trips to the Round of 32 under Calhoun.

Wichita took advantage of their homecourt, to say nothing of their decided size advantage over Southern. Cliff Levingston and Antoine Carr were terrific forwards and went for 24/13 and 18/10 respectively. The Shockers rolled to a 95-70 win. Meanwhile, Kansas had won the Big Eight tournament and the Jayhawks kept their momentum going, by shooting 55 percent and pulling out a 69-66 win over Ole Miss.

And the Sun Belt Conference made something of a statement, with both entrants, Virginia Commonwealth and UAB, making easy work of their opponents. VCU met Long Island. The Sharks had once been coached by the legendary Clair Bee back in the 1930s and 1940s. Bee became known to many of us as the author of the Chip Hilton Sports Series, a series of fictional short stories about a great three-sport high-school athlete. Bee won the NIT title twice at a time when that tournament was the more prestigious event. This season was Long Island's first time in the NCAA bracket.

It didn't last long. VCU got the free throw line 37 times compared to just 15 for Long Island and won 85-69. UAB forced Western Kentucky into 25 turnovers and registered a 93-68 blowout.

The Round of 32 was now filled out. Sunday's schedule was set as follows. As with Saturday, the winners would play each other in the Sweet 16, with the exception of the Mideast...

East: Virginia-Villanova, Tennessee-Virginia Commonwealth

Mideast: Wake Forest-Boston College, Kentucky-UAB

Midwest: Iowa-Wichita State, Arizona State-Kansas

West: North Carolina-Pitt, Utah-Northeastern

THE ROUND OF 32 - CHAOS UNFOLDS

Saturday, March 14

St. Joe's was a basketball program with a nice history in the competitive environs of Philadelphia college hoops, although the success had more to do with what their coaches did after leaving campus. Jack Ramsay and Jack McKinney both coached the Hawks in the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s. Each went on to the pros.

Ramsay won an NBA title in Portland in 1977. McKinney surely would have won at least one of his own—he was coaching the Lakers after they drafted Magic Johnson for the 1980 season. McKinney then had the worst-timed biking accident in the history of cycling when he was badly injured early in that season and went on to watch Paul Westhead guide the Lakers to the championship. McKinney never got back on the L.A. sidelines.

Jim Lynam was now in his third year at St. Joe's and the school was in the NCAA field for the first time since McKinney departed seven years earlier. Lynam, like his predecessors, would cash in his success for a gig in the pros.

That was the near future. In the immediate present, the Hawks spent the 1981 season looking like a nice team, but one that would play in the NIT. They went 17-7, but lost their showcase games against Maryland, North Carolina and Villanova and finished third in the East Coast Conference. In the league tournament, St. Joe's knocked off Temple in the semis and then derailed American, who had gone undefeated in conference play, with a 63-60 upset in the championship game.

Thursday night's win over Creighton kept the Hawks magic going. Warrick, the hero of the Creighton game, had averaged 14ppg from his guard spot. Tony Costner was a reliable center, while Boo Williams was productive at power forward. John Smith was undersized on the front line at 6'5", but managed to average 11 points/6 rebounds.

All of which made St. Joe's a nice team that had enjoyed a good run in getting this far and could now make a polite farewell on this Saturday afternoon against DePaul.

The Hawks were able to keep this a slow-paced game and give themselves a chance. Both teams shot over 50 percent from the floor, but the Blue Demons led almost the entire second half and watching the game it was tough to get a sense that St. Joe's would actually pull the upset.

Maybe it was the pressure of the tournament, but with the lead and 6 ½ minutes to play, Ray Meyer pulled DePaul into a slowdown game. The Blue Demons were playing not to lose. By the time Warrick nailed a 20-foot jump shot at the 0:47 mark, the lead was trimmed to a single point. DePaul led 48-47 and was barely hanging on.

The Hawks pressed and trapped furiously. Three different times, DePaul had to call a timeout. Finally, Skip Dillard was fouled. The clock was under ten seconds. It might be ugly, but DePaul had the man they wanted on the line—Dillard's nickname of "Money" came precisely because of his ability to hit free throws. All he had to do was bag both ends of this one-and-one, and DePaul would escape.

Dillard missed the front end.

Warrick rebounded. Lynam eschewed a timeout. In the critical moments of this game, the youthful Lynam did not overcoach, while the veteran Meyer did. Warrick moved up the floor. DePaul was slow getting back defensively. Warrick threw a pass ahead to Lonnie McFarlane in the corner. With the clock nearing zero, it would have been perfectly instinctive for McFarlane to take the jump shot. Except that St. Joe's had so thoroughly beaten the Blue Demons back down the floor, that John Smith was all alone under the basket. Smith screamed desperately for the ball. McFarlane heard him and dropped a pass inside for the bucket.

"St. Joe's wins!!!", screamed an incredulous Don Criqui on the NBC broadcast. "One of the biggest upsets in the history of the NCAA playoffs!" For the second straight year, DePaul was a #1 seed that said goodbye before the regionals even got started.

Indiana and Kentucky on the opposite side of the Mideast bracket were suddenly cast in the favorite's role and the Hoosiers took the floor in Dayton immediately after DePaul's loss. If Indiana was inspired by the opportunity that lay ahead of them, the opening minutes of their game with Maryland didn't show it. The Terps scored the first eight points. Buck Williams got himself started and what ended up as a 16 points/10 rebounds performance.

But that was the end of the good news for the Terps. Indiana woke up, got mad and completely took the game over. The frontcourt dominated, with Tolbert going for 26/7 and Turner posting a 20/7 line. Isaiah was brilliant, scoring 19 and dishing fourteen assists. IU shot a sizzling 65 percent from the floor and by halftime they led 50-34.

Albert King certainly didn't give up shooting, as he took 28 shots from the floor in the desperate attempt by Maryland to get back in the game. But he only made ten shots and his 22 points didn't exactly come with efficiency. Indiana cruised home to a 99-64 win.

The Hoosiers were going home for the regionals and the top seed in their bracket was gone. The college basketball world looked ahead to what everyone presumed would be a Sweet 16 battle royale with Kentucky.

The basketball-crazed state of Indiana also had Notre Dame to root on today. The Irish faced James Madison. Led by Lou Campanelli, the Dukes were making the first of three straight NCAA Tournament appearances, with each one of them producing a first-round victory. This JMU team had a talented power forward in Linton Townes, who averaged 15/6. They had taken Virginia to the wire in a 53-52 loss back in December. Between that, and Thursday's win over Georgetown, Digger Phelps had plenty of reason to be wary of the Dukes.

A game that was sluggishly played both ways worked into the hands of the underdog. Notre Dame only led 23-20 at halftime. The Irish extended the lead as high as eight points multiple times in the second half and often seemed on the verge of breaking away. But James Madison never let Notre Dame get comfortable, constantly chipping back. The score was still 47-41 with 3 ½ minutes left.

The Irish were being rescued by Tracy Jackson, who finished the afternoon with 21 points/12 rebounds. He got loose on a fast break, scored, drew the foul and hit the free throw. The lead now 50-41, the game was essentially over. Led by Jackson and a big free throw discrepancy—twenty attempts for Notre Dame to ten for James Madison, the Irish got an unimpressive 54-45 win.

Shortly after St. Joe's stunned the nation, NBC's coverage took most viewers to Austin, where Arkansas and Louisville were playing a fantastic basketball game. It wasn't always well-played, with 41 combined turnovers both ways, but the pace was fast, the score was tight and the contrasts between the two lineups was apparent.

The Razorbacks were top-heavy, with Walker leading the way with 23 points and Reed finishing with 19. Hastings was good underneath, at 12/8. Meanwhile, the Cardinals had no individual standouts, with seven different players scoring at least eight, but no more than eleven points. Arkansas clung to a 72-71 lead. Louisville had the ball in the game's closing moments.

The clock moved under ten seconds. Louisville's Poncho Wright fired from twenty feet. He missed. Derek Smith went and got the clutch offensive rebound and hit a nice putback. There were just five seconds remaining. Arkansas trailed 73-72 and had to go the length of the floor.

Louisville defended the inbound pass well. Reed caught the pass near midcourt, but had two defenders stalking him. He got one step past midcourt and had to unload. Given the Hogs had five seconds to work with, it wasn't exactly an ideal shot. But for the second time this afternoon, the nation would be stunned. Reed's halfcourt heave went on. The Cardinals' repeat bid was over.

Given that Louisville and Arkansas was the 4-5 game on the bracket, this one didn't have the kind of deeper implications that St. Joe's upset had. It's tough to say LSU was getting a real break either way. And watching the Tigers dismantle Lamar, it's tough to say that it mattered.

It's not that Lamar wasn't a worthy foe for this point in the tournament. The program was in the field for the third straight year. The previous two entrants had been coached by Billy Tubbs, who cashed in the success for the Oklahoma job. Pat Foster was in his first season on the sidelines. Lamar had knocked off Pitt to open the season and lost a competitive game at Houston. Once in league play, the Cardinals cruised through the Southland Conference, winning both the regular season and tournament titles.

Olliver, the hero of Thursday's win over Missouri, had been doing it all year long. The 6'1" senior was a long-range marksman who averaged 22ppg. And he kept doing it against LSU, going off for 29 points on a red-hot 13-for-20 from the perimeter. His backcourt mate, Alvin Brooks, passed for eleven assists.

But LSU was too physical. The Tigers dominated the boards, doubling up Lamar in total rebounds. Mitchell was tough down low, with an 18/8 day. Carter had a big afternoon scoring 26. And no one was better than Macklin. Scoring 31 points and grabbing sixteen rebounds, Macklin led a lineup that shot 61 percent from the floor and won going away, 100-78.

As good as Macklin was, he was only the second-best individual performer on this Saturday in the Round of 32. Back spasms or not, Ainge was going to play for BYU in their game with UCLA. For most of the first half, this seemed like a standard 3-6 game in the bracket. It was close, but the favorite was ahead. The Bruins were up 21-17 as the clock neared the five-minute mark.

Then Ainge and BYU simply went off. A 14-1 run concluded the first half. Ainge hit nine of ten shots from the floor in the first half alone. During this key spurt, Ainge went 1-on-3 on a fast break, pulled up and hit a jump shot. The play might violate all fundamentals of how a player should handle a fast break situation, but it underscored how the rest of this afternoon in Providence was going to play out.

Ainge finished with 37 points. Roberts, Kite and Trumbo combined to get 31 rebounds. Mike Sanders, who scored 14 on 7-for-12 shooting, was the only UCLA player to distinguish himself against BYU's 1-3-1 zone defense. The final score was 78-55.

We had a couple of Sweet 16 matchups set with BYU-Notre Dame and LSU-Arkansas. We knew Indiana was going home to a weakened Mideast Regional. But the day wasn't done. UCLA might have had a bad day on the basketball floor, but their campus was still host to the two West Regional games that would create more headlines for the Sunday newspapers.

Oregon State was another #1 seed, like DePaul, playing at a deliberate pace. The Beavers got out to ten-point leads two different times in the first half against Kansas State, but never put the Wildcats away. The game went to the locker room at 26-19.

In the second half, K-State kept chipping away. They got to the free throw line more frequently and made better use of their chances—16-for-18 compared to 8-for-12. In a game where points were hard to come by, the eight-point advantage at the foul line was critical.

Oregon State's lead was down to 46-44 with just over five minutes to play. Steve Johnson appeared to extend the lead with a hook shot, but an offensive foul disallowed the bucket. It was Johnson's fourth foul. Less than two minutes later, he fouled out.

Ed Nealy was a beneficiary of Oregon State's big man being out of the lineup and he finished the afternoon with nine rebounds. Kansas State pulled even at 48-48. Oregon State got to the free throw line for a one-and-one opportunity with 2:03 on the clock. Charlie Sitton missed the front end.

Kansas State wound the clock all the way down. Hartman was content to put the ball in Blackman's hands and let him take the last shot. The small forward had 12 points by now and hit half of his twelve shots, so he was in a distant rhythm. Blackman took the ball and went to the right baseline. He pulled up and shot from 12 feet. Bingo. There were two seconds left when the ball went through and Blackman's heroics basically ended it.

Another 1-seed had fallen. The third last-second shot of the afternoon had gone down. The NCAA Tournament, this normally predictable event, was starting to go a little mad.

And events in Los Angeles weren't even done. Illinois-Wyoming isn't a game that gets remembered in the history books the way the trifecta of St. Joe's-DePaul, Arkansas-Louisville and Kansas State-Oregon State do, with their last second shots knocking out two 1-seeds and the defending national champ. But the Illini and Cowboys played a thriller of their own.

Wyoming shot better from the floor and got a bit more at the free throw line. Charles Bradley hit for 25 points, while Bill Garnett added 15. Illinois was better at hitting the boards, enjoying a decisive edge on the glass. Mark Smith posted a 14/8 while Eddie Johnson went for 19/7.

The biggest shot of the Illini season was hit by Perry Range, a 22-footer that tied up the game 65-all with sixteen seconds left. Wyoming came racing down. Garnett got a look for a potential game-winner. He missed. Smith went and got the rebound. It was fitting that a rebound would decide this game for the Illini, because in the closing seconds, Smith was fouled. In the bonus, he would go to the free throw line. Smith calmly hit both free throws and Illinois pulled out a 67-65 win.

The win concluded a great day for the Big Ten. Illinois was the immediate beneficiary of K-State's upset, now able to draw the Wildcats, rather than Oregon State in the upcoming Sweet 16.

Sunday, March 15

In a sport dominated by blueblood programs, the two Sun Belt teams in this NCAA field were anything but. Alabama-Birmingham's basketball team was in its *second year of existence*. Gene Bartow had dealt a big blow to the egos at UCLA. After taking the Bruins to the '76 Final Four, Bartow quickly tired of being in Wooden's shadow and decided he would rather build a program from scratch. The first year in Birmingham saw Bartow win 18 games.

This year's UAB team was well-balanced, with 6'4" Oliver Robinson offering real explosiveness from the two-guard spot. Robinson went for 16ppg. Chris Giles and Donny Speer, at 6'8" each, made for a smallish front court, but both were tough and combined for 23/13 per night.

Virginia Commonwealth basketball was born in 1974. J.D. Barnett was still the only coach the Rams had ever hired. In 1980, he made the NCAA field for the first time. Barnett had a 16ppg scorer of his own, in 6'9" forward Ken Stancell. Greg McCray was a tough power forward who grabbed 10 rebounds a night. Danny Kottack, Edmund Sherrod and Monty Knight all played the perimeter and all scored in double figures. Like UAB, VCU wasn't overwhelming in size, but they were good in the backcourt and their frontcourt people were aggressive.

The Blazers and Rams were joined by South Alabama in a lively three-team Sun Belt race. All three ended up tied for first. Virginia Commonwealth got the seeding advantage. That set up UAB to meet South Alabama in the conference tournament semifinals. An 86-59 blowout sent the Blazers on to the final. The 27-point margin of defeat surely didn't help the Jaguars' cause with the Selection Committee and they were left at home.

UAB and VCU played an exciting final, with Virginia Commonwealth pulling out a 62-61 overtime win. They both got bids, both won on Friday night and now both had an opportunity to make some noise against the SEC. The Blazers were slated to meet Kentucky, a rematch of a December non-conference game the 'Cats had won by eight. The Rams had a date with Tennessee—where a victory could potentially earn VCU a non-conference rematch of their own, against Virginia.

With both teams a little cold from the field, in the 40 percent neighborhood on the afternoon, Kentucky and UAB were in a tight game into the second half. Chuck Verdeber had a good game for the Wildcats with a 16/9 line. But Bowie did not. The UAB zone frustrated the Kentucky center and with just under four minutes to play, he fouled out.

UAB was keeping the Kentucky offense on the perimeter. At the other end of the floor, the Blazers were attacking and getting to the foul line. UAB got forty free throw attempts against just twenty for Kentucky. The final scoring margin on free throws was 31-16. The Blazers got a lead and then put the ball in the hands of their 5'10" point guard Glenn Marcus. The senior leader hit 12-for-15 from the stripe and basically put this one to bed from the line.

The 69-62 final sent Kentucky packing. Watching from home, Indiana had to be shocked by their good fortune. Another favorite in the Mideast had fallen.

In the meantime, Virginia Commonwealth was hanging right with Tennessee. The Rams were outrebounding the Vols and getting a terrific game from McCray, who hit 10 of 14 shots and finished with 23 points/8 rebounds.

What Tennessee was doing was taking care of the basketball, only committing eight turnovers. And they were getting good games from Ellis and Howard Wood, who combined to hit 17 of 26 shots and score forty points. The game went to overtime tied 56-56.

Neither team could score in the extra session. At the 2:25 mark, the 56-all score held. VCU had the ball and was settling into a long routine of holding it for the last shot. Then Kottak stepped out of bounds. Tennessee had it back.

It was the Vols turn to wind the clock all the way down. As expected, the ball went to Ellis, With two seconds remaining, he knocked down a shot. They were the only points of overtime. Tennessee had survived 58-56.

Virginia was the last 1-seed left to play and they were hoping to resemble LSU, rather than DePaul or Oregon State. But the Cavs had a pesky foe in Villanova. Alex Bradley dug in against Sampson and held his own, getting 13 rebounds and keying a 28-23 edge on the glass for the Wildcats. Villanova led 27-24 and held a persistent lead through much of the second half.

But Ralph wasn't going to let Virginia fall by the wayside. And the fact the Cavs played the second half from behind—in contrast to the Blue Demons and Beavers on Saturday—meant that they couldn't outthink themselves and slow the game down. The ball kept going to Sampson, and he rang up 17 points and 12 rebounds. Virginia finally got into the lead and then knocked down their free throws, securing the 54-50 win.

Boston College and Wake Forest had great guards, in Bagley and Frank Johnson respectively, and both players met the moment. This was the game paired up with DePaul in the bracket, so a reasonable path to the Elite Eight was now there for the taking.

Johnson scored 20 points and led the way for Wake Forest. Bagley did more than lead the way for BC—he carried the Eagles. The only player to score in double figures, Bagley poured in 35 points and kept the Eagles in the game.

Even Bagley had to grab a brief rest though. He needed a breather midway through the second half and Wake leading 53-50. This was a chance for the Demon Deacons to put this one to bed. The Eagles needed an unlikely hero to emerge and one did in Burnett Adams. With three straight blocked shots, Adams made sure BC stayed in it. Bagley came off the bench and with fresh legs, he promptly knocked down three straight jumpers and tied the game at 58 with five minutes to play.

Wake nudged back ahead 60-59. Martin Clark popped in a 15-footer to give the Eagles the lead with 2:41 to go. The Deacons answered. The clock moved under a minute with Wake holding the 62-61 lead.

Bagley got the ball on the left flank and drove. Cut off by Johnson, Bagley was forced to pull up for the jumper. Even with Johnson in his face, Bagley knocked it down. The Eagles applied pressure defense and forced Wake into mistakes. Bagley was able to secure this game at the free throw line. The 67-64 win sent BC on into the regionals.

The West Regional might have produced drama on Saturday, but Sunday's games in El Paso were about favorites establishing themselves. North Carolina and Utah each jumped out to double-digit leads by halftime and cruised home to easy wins.

The Tar Heels shot 59 percent against Pitt, while holding the Panthers to 37 percent. The frontline of Worthy, Perkins and Wood produced 56 points. North Carolina gave the underdog some early hope when they followed Indiana's lead from yesterday and spotted Pitt the first eight points. But a 12-0 run late in the first half put the Tar Heels firmly in command and the final score was 74-57.

The Utes simply overwhelmed Northeastern. The rebounding margin ended up 50-35. Utah shot 62 percent from the floor. Vranes hit all nine of his shots from the floor, scored 27 points and hauled in eleven rebounds. Chambers' final line read 21/12. The feisty Northeastern backcourt of Moss and Harris gave it their all and combined for 44 points, but they came at a price of 14-for-39 shooting. Utah's lead grew as high as 38 points in the second half and the final was 94-69.

Anyone looking for upset possibilities on Sunday would have surely had their eye on Wichita. The Shockers had homecourt advantage, they had great forwards in Cliff Levingston and Antoine Carr and Iowa was the very definition of fading favorite.

But when the Hawkeyes jumped out to a 36-25 lead at the half and then extended that lead to fifteen points in the second half, it looked like Iowa might be ready to stop their late season slide. Vince Brookins was on his way to a 16-point afternoon.

But Levingston and Carr were both having monster games, each clearing the 20-point and 10-rebound thresholds. The Shockers dominated the glass and consistently got to the foul line. Buoyed by the home crowd, they came on strong down the stretch and pulled into a 56-56 tie.

Iowa still had the ball with five seconds left. Olson signaled for a timeout. Twelve years before Chris Webber would make a similar mistake in a bigger spot, Olson had called a timeout he didn't have. Technical foul. Wichita converted both free throws, converted two more on taking possession and won 60-56. It was a devastating end to Iowa's season and Wichita had the look of a very dangerous 6-seed as they moved on.

If one could see Iowa's fall coming, the same could not be said for Arizona State when they took the floor against Kansas. But in a stunning fall from grace, the Sun Devils were simply dominated from the early going. The Jayhawks broke open a tie game in the final eight minutes of the first half, going on a 24-8 push. ASU couldn't stop Kansas' Tony Guy from getting inside. Guy poured in 36 points, consistently knocking down his shots from 10 feet or closer.

Byron Scott showed the toughness that would one day fill his hand with NBA championship rings and he lit it up for 32 points on 15-for-22 shooting. But on this talented and hot team, Scott ended up a lonely warrior. Arizona State never got closer than nine in the second half and lost 88-71.

The Sun Devils' loss completed a brutal weekend for the Pac-10, who saw all three of their teams fall. And while Sunday wasn't as dramatic as Saturday had been, it was almost as damaging to favorites. Of the 16 teams who came into this NCAA bracket with first-round byes, only nine had survived.

THE NEW-LOOK BRACKET

After the carnage, here's how the bracket shaped up...

EAST REGIONAL: Atlanta (Thursday & Sunday)

Virginia-Tennessee

Notre Dame-BYU

The most stable of the four regionals. Even losing 3-seed UCLA didn't seem that impactful, as the public was looking forward to Ainge going up against Digger Phelps and the Irish.

WEST REGIONAL: Salt Lake City (Thursday & Sunday)

Kansas State-Illinois

North Carolina-Utah

The anticipated battle of the frontcourts was set with Tar Heels-Utes and the winner would be the clear favorite to make the Final Four.

MIDEAST REGIONAL: Bloomington (Friday & Sunday)

St. Joe's-Boston College

UAB-Indiana

Was there anyone on the planet that didn't think the Hoosiers would coast into the Final Four against this gutted bracket?

MIDWEST REGIONAL: New Orleans (Friday & Sunday)

LSU-Arkansas

Kansas-Wichita

LSU looked almost as certain as Indiana to ride through their remaining games, but that Kansas-Wichita battle promised to have some bad blood running through it.

Thursday, March 19

Notre Dame and the rest of the Catholic Church were celebrating the feast of St. Joseph on this 19th of March and the Irish were looking to bring that saint's quiet, humble work ethic to the most anticipated game of the Round of Sixteen.

Digger Phelps went all-out to stop Ainge and used a box-and-one defense, with Paxson chasing Ainge and the other four players lined up in a zone. The defensive strategy clearly had BYU off guard in the early going. On the offensive side, Tripucka, Jackson and Woolridge all hit jumpers over the Cougar zone and Frank Arnold shifted into man-to-man five minutes into the game.

Jackson came out quickly for the Irish, with five points and five rebounds in the game's first ten minutes. He also guarded Ainge on a fast break. When the Player of the Year tried to do a 360-degree spin to get some shooting space, Jackson calmly held his ground and blocked the shot. On the BYU side, Roberts picked up his third foul midway through the first half. Ainge couldn't get open and hadn't scored from the floor. The Cougars as a team were shooting 20 percent.

To watch the game told you Notre Dame was in control. But some sloppy turnovers cost the Irish a chance to really open up some distance and their lead was 16-8. It was a nice start to be sure, but it could have been much worse for BYU. Ainge was clearly frustrated during a sideline timeout. Kite joined Roberts in picking up his third foul in the first half. The only thing that went well for the Cougars was Steve Craig, Ainge's backcourt mate, knocking down three buckets and keeping his team afloat. At halftime, the Irish led 28-18.

The intermission break didn't change the flow of the game, at least not right away. Tripucka immediately drove the right baseline for a bucket. The Irish lead went to 32-18. It was 21 minutes into the game when Ainge finally got his first basket from the floor, a nice pump fake to get past Paxson, a double-clutch jumper that went in, drew the foul and ended up a three-point play.

BYU, wanting to play at a faster pace, picked up their defense full court, but Paxson easily broke it and calmly reset the Irish into the halfcourt offense. Tripucka knocked down another jumper from the perimeter. Then Craig missed a layup in transition and got called for a foul back on the defensive end. BYU was showing no signs of life. The score was 40-29 and there were 11 1/2 minutes left.

The momentum started to shift when the Cougars scored and Woolridge, playing defense on the interior, grabbed the rim. Hanging on the rim was called very tightly in this era and even the most modest grab got a player whistled for a technical foul. Woolridge was called for one and Ainge hit the free throw. The lead was eight.

Ainge made a defensive steal and found Roberts for an easy fast break basket. Notre Dame appeared to answer back with a Jackson layup, but a three-second violation nullified the bucket. Ainge promptly hit from the baseline. The lead was down to four.

Woolridge was having a terrific night. He ended up hitting eight of his ten shots. He hit consecutive baskets to push the lead back out to eight. At this stage of a game where points looked hard to come by, it had the feel of Notre Dame pushing back BYU's last desperate drive.

But sloppy ball handling did the Irish in again. The Cougars scored, picked up a turnover and scored again. In the blink of an eye it was a tight four-point game again. Roberts cut the lead to two with a putback. After the foul-plagued first half, Roberts was now 5-for-5 in the second half, the best player as BYU tried to rally.

Tripucka calmly drilled an outside shot to give Notre Dame some modest breathing space again, but another turnover hurt the Irish. Their lead stood at 46-44 with the clock nearing four minutes.

Phelps decided to spread the floor and slow the game down. The Irish were the ones that wanted to play at a slower tempo so on a certain level this made sense. What seemed less logical is why Notre Dame's big men were the ones out on the top of the key doing the ball handling.

They didn't do badly, but none of the frontline—Tripucka, Woolridge or Jackson looked particularly comfortable as they played keepaway near midcourt. Paxson was routinely handling Ainge's defense pressure and might have been able to provide a balance between slowing the game down and still running a legitimate offense that might score. The way the spread actually functioned for Notre Dame was the very definition of "playing not to lose."

The Irish still nudged out to a 48-44 lead. Greg Baliff, a BYU role player got the ball and drove hard to the hoop. He pulled up right in front of Jackson and scored. The whistle blew. If it was a charge, BYU might be finished. But it wasn't. Jackson appeared to be moving just a bit as he got to his spot and was called for a block. Baliff hit the free throw and the lead was down to a point.

When Notre Dame's reserve center Tim Andree missed an open layup in the halfcourt offense, the Cougars had a chance to go ahead. Ainge went up for the shot. He missed. On a floor with all these big men, it was Paxson who went up and got the clutch rebound. There were less than three minutes left.

BYU trapped and Notre Dame's big men handled the ball. It wasn't pretty to watch, but Roberts eventually fouled out. Woolridge went to the line for a one-and-one. He missed. Ainge got the ball out in transition and appeared to have made a nice drive-and-dish to Kite for a basketball. Except Ainge had traveled. He screamed in frustration at the officials as his rough night continued. A minute and thirty-four seconds to go.

The battle between the Cougar halfcourt trap and the ballhandling of the Irish big men continued. This time BYU forced a jump ball. There was no possession arrow at this time. The Cougars won the jump and took possession with 1:14 left. Baliff was the one the Irish defense left open and he stepped up another big shot, this one a jumper from the foul line. For the first time all night BYU had the lead, 49-48 and 1:14 to go.

Notre Dame ran the clock down, taking two timeouts in the process. Nothing Phelps came up with seemed particularly inspired. BYU defended well. Tripucka, with a defender draped on him, took a jumper from the right wing. Bucket. The Irish star had 14 points on the night, most of them in the second half. He stood to be the hero with eight seconds left.

After a timeout, BYU inbounded. Ainge was able to get the ball and raced up the court. Bracketed by three different Notre Dame players at midcourt, Ainge made a dazzling behind-the-back dribble to split all three defenders. He attacked the basket. Andree was at the foul line, but perhaps worried about fouling, appeared to play it tentatively. Ainge got the basket and laid it in.

The final box score says Ainge went 4-for-10 with 12 points. By almost any metric, it had been an awful night. He'd been outplayed by Paxson up and down the floor. But with the money on the table, Ainge had made the play this game would be remembered for. BYU won 51-50.

This loss was more than a heartbreaking ending to Notre Dame's season. It was the end of an entire era of success in Fighting Irish basketball. Going back to their 1974 win over UCLA that ended the Bruins' 88-game winning streak, Phelps had Notre Dame consistently on the national stage. They were routinely in the Sweet 16 and had made a Final Four. It was the glory era of Notre Dame basketball.

Even in the moment, everyone knew that a big rebuilding job awaited, with Tripucka, Jackson and Woolridge all graduating. What no one knew at the time was that Notre Dame wouldn't even make it back to the NCAA Tournament until 1985. It took until 1986-87 to get good seeds and make another Sweet 16. Phelps made his last NCAA Tournament in 1990 and was let go a year later. Notre Dame basketball wouldn't be a real national contender again until their consecutive Elite Eight appearances under Mike Brey in 2015-16. 1981 was an inflection point in the history of an up-and-down program that's struggled to put itself on par with the school's more heralded football team.

So it was BYU who would get the crack at Virginia. The Cavs had won earlier in the night in spite of a tough outing from Sampson, who struggled to nine points on 4-for-13 shooting. Virginia only led 27-26 at the half.

But while Ellis was having a respectable night that ended with 13 points, no one else in the Vols lineup was really stepping up. In the meantime, Lamp was hot for the Cavs, hitting eight of 11 shots and scoring 18 points. Lee Raker came off the bench with ten. And Sampson made a difference on the defensive end. Early in the second half, with Virginia up 36-31, the big man delivered a couple big shot blocks. The Cavs got control of the game and won 62-48.

In the battle of the frontlines out in Salt Lake City, North Carolina got consistent performance across the board. Wood, Worthy and Perkins all scored 15 points. Perkins and Worthy each had double-digit rebounding nights. Worthy added six assists in a brilliant all-around performance.

Utah's frontcourt people hit the boards hard, something that's always a good sign of the effort being brought. Vranes hauled in fourteen rebounds while Chambers added eight. But the Utes' stars couldn't find the basket. Bankowski had a rough night and collectively, the trio scored 25 points fewer than their season average. The Tar Heels churned out an efficient 61-56 win.

Illinois might not have had the complete frontline set, but they were counting on their dynamic forward duo to deliver them. Eddie Johnson had 15 points/9 rebounds and keyed a 34-25 rebounding edge for the Illini against Kansas State in the very late show that tipped off at 11:30 PM EST.

But Kansas State was consistently getting to the foul line. The Wildcats shot 25 free throws to just three for the Illini. And with Nealy pulling down 14 boards, K-State was hanging in on the interior. The Wildcats led 30-27 at the half.

In a tight second half, Illinois kept flirting with taking the lead, but never quite doing it, always trailing by a point or two. Kansas State hit clutch free throws down the stretch, with Nealy, Blackman and Tim Jankovich all delivering in the final minute. The Wildcats pulled it out, 57-52 and Hartman was on his way to another Elite Eight.

Friday, March 20

It was officially declared National Basketball Week in the state of Kansas by the governor. All three of the state's major college basketball teams were still playing. Kansas State's win last night ensured that two of those three would play for a spot in the Final Four. Kansas and Wichita State went to New Orleans to play Friday night's first game.

The Superdome had just opened six years earlier. The NCAA awarded the Final Four to New Orleans for 1982 and this year's Midwest Regionals were going to be the venue's dry run. The result was a then-record crowd of 35,000-plus on hand for the Jayhawks and Shockers.

There was bad blood between the two programs, but it all ran one way. Wichita was desperate to get a game with Kansas. The schools had played just four times in their history, the last time over a quarter-century ago. The Jayhawks didn't want to be bothered. The people of Wichita were angry enough that a local representative in the state legislature introduced a bill requiring the two teams to play every year.

The legislation didn't go anywhere, but perhaps the NCAA Selection Committee heard Wichita's pleas in setting up the bracket this way. It was strikingly similar to the battle raging at this same time in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, where Louisville kept getting rebuffed by UK in the efforts to get a game. That was another matchup that eventually had to get orchestrated by the Selection Committee, a regional final that took place in 1983.

Kansas was a consistent winner under Ted Owens. The head coach had made two Final Fours, the most recent being in 1974. Owens' 1981 edition was built around a high-scoring backcourt. Darnell Valentine and Tony Guy each average 16ppg. Then there was a lot of balance up front, with everyone from David Magley to lanky John Crawford to big Victor Mitchell to Art Housey banging around the boards. All scored between 8-10 points a game and all of them got at least five rebounds a night.

Kansas lost at Kentucky during the non-conference schedule, but nipped North Carolina 56-55 in a home-neutral game at Kemper Arena in Kansas City. The Jayhawks' 9-5 record in Big Eight play left them in third place. But they beat both Missouri and Kansas State in the tournament to win the league's automatic bid with a record of 21-7. That was the prelude to their stunning demolition of Arizona State that brought them to New Orleans.

Gene Smithson was in his third year on the sidelines at Wichita, looking to revitalize a program that had been quiet since a Final Four run in 1965. The powerful forward combo of Levingston and Carr was one of the best in the nation and averaged a combined 35 points/18 rebounds. Randy Smithson, the coach's son, was a good outside shooter and averaged 13 points, while handing out five assists per game. Tony Martin was another competent backcourt scorer and 6'11" Ozell Jones anchored the defense and rebounded from his center spot.

Wichita didn't play a particularly challenging schedule and they lost twice to Tulsa in Missouri Valley Conference play. But the Shockers beat their main rival, Creighton, twice and took home the regular season title. The Bluejays turned around and won the third round in the conference tournament final, but Wichita had a strong enough resume to make the Dance.

The arrival of the NCAAs was bringing both good news and bad news. The good news had been their assignment to play the opening weekend at home, something that had clearly helped push the Shockers through. Then there was Kansas also winning and giving Wichita the opportunity they longed for.

But the lineup was having challenges. Martin was dealing with back problems and would play sparingly. Worse, Jones was suspended for academic violations. A court injunction had kept him playing for a little while after the school handed down the suspension, but by NCAA Tournament time he was gone. Wichita survived the first two games, but Jones would be badly missed tonight against that deep Kansas frontcourt. The Wichita players wore armbands in his honor.

On the opening possession, Guy had an open jumper from short range. The miss was the first sign that tonight wouldn't go quite as well for him as the Arizona State game had. The miss turned into a transition slam dunk for Levingston on the other end. Then Carr got out in transition for another big dunk. Owens could be seen glaring at his team, unhappy about the way they were getting back on defense.

Carr hit two other shots and Wichita nudged out to a 12-7 lead. The Kansas offensive flow looked completely cold, with no real movement. But the Shocker attack wasn't a lot sharper. By the midway point of the first half, Wichita had turned it over seven times and the Jayhawks tied it up 16-16.

The game continued to stay tight onto halftime, where Wichita led 33-32 and throughout the second half. At no point did either team lead by more than six points, and most of the time the margin swung back and forth between four points either way.

The tenseness of the game and the passion of the local rivalry didn't necessarily equate to a well-played game. The teams combined for three traveling calls in the early part of the second half. Kansas appeared to get some momentum going around the 15-minute mark when some halfcourt traps forced turnovers and turned a 39-34 deficit into a one-point lead in short order. In a two-minute stretch, Carr picked up two fouls. He now had four for the night and was forced to the bench.

Valentine was having an exceptional game for Kansas, on his way to shooting 8-for-13 and scoring 21 points. The Jayhawks had the opportunity to open this one up. But like Notre Dame the night before, Kansas missed their chance. Wichita got some clutch buckets to stay afloat with Carr on the bench. When Levingston hit a shot in the lane, we were tied up 47-all.

Just when Wichita was rolling, some more adversity came in. Levingston went down. Fortunately it was just a cramp, but he did have to briefly leave the game. Carr had to come in sooner than Gene Smithson would have liked to see.

Martin, bad back and all, stepped up and hit a shot from the top of the key. Carr got the ball in the low post and made a fabulous move, spinning from the baseline to the inside and finishing with the left hand. He drew the foul and made the free throw. It was still a tie game, now 54-54, but the Shockers were hanging in during this stretch when only one of their star forwards was on the court.

Both of those forwards would make some big plays as the game neared the stretch drive. Levingston blocked a shot. Carr went one-on-one against Crawford, dunked, drew the foul and made the free throw. The Shockers led 60-59.

But Kansas stayed calm, symbolized by Crawford staying cool after the Carr dunk and just coming back down the floor and hitting a go-ahead jumper. On the other end, Carr made a beautiful interior pass to Levingston who drew the foul. But he only made one of two, and we stayed tied 61-61.

The clock was now under five minutes. Kansas got a basket and then packed their 2-2-1 zone even tighter. Wichita stayed extremely patient on offense, moving the ball around the zone and looking for an open shot. The zone was too tight for Carr or Levingston. But Smithson got a good look from ten feet out. The ball just rimmed out.

Crawford was fouled on the other end and went to the line for a one-and-one. At this stage in the game, getting ahead by multiple possessions was much more significant than it would be today, when you have the shot clock and three-point line. But Crawford missed the front end. Carr was fouled on the other end, but only made one of two. Kansas still clung to a 63-62 lead.

The Jayhawks spread out and looked perfectly willing to run the rest of the clock out if they had to. Wichita stretched the defense. Kansas got an open layup. Magley missed but Guy followed with the tip-in. Kansas by three. Then they got a stop. Valentine went up and got the rebound with 1:24 left.

The Jayhawks spread the floor again. At the 0:56 mark, the Shockers fouled Valentine. Ahead by three and their hottest player going to the foul line, this game was clearly Kansas' to lose.

But free throw shooting was not Valentine's strength. He was 69 percent on the season and he missed this front end of the one-and-one. Wichita came down the floor. Kansas was bound and determined to make someone other than Levingston or Carr beat them. Someone like reserve guard Mike Jones. From about 25 feet, just to the left of the top of the circle, Jones let it fly. Good. One-point game. Kansas got the ball to midcourt and under pressure, took a timeout with 0:33 left.

Owens had the perfect play lined up. He sent Valentine deep. Guy delivered a perfect pass, a nice over-the-shoulder throw that surely drew the envy of Frank Seuer, the Jayhawks' football quarterback who had just led his team to a bowl game. Valentine was going in for the layup that would have virtually iced the game. Randy Smithson raced back. He put just enough of a challenge on to force Valentine to twist his body a bit. It was enough that the layup rolled off the rim and the Shockers chased it down.

One more time, Wichita wanted to go inside. One more time, Kansas packed everyone back. One more time, Jones let it fly from very deep, just to the left of the top of the key. And one more time, he nailed it. The clock was at two seconds and Kansas' last desperation shot missed.

Wichita had a stunning 66-65 win. Mike Jones, after a college career that he had found disheartening over playing time issues, was a hero. The Shockers, after getting all the adversity thrown at them, had a win. And not just a Sweet 16 win. But a win of any kind over Kansas. The good people of Wichita had plenty of reason to be proud of their town on this March night in New Orleans.

The Shockers would play LSU. The Tigers dismantled Arkansas, taking a 34-18 lead by halftime and cruising home to a 72-56 win. Cook was the focal point of the first half, scoring ten points down low. Ethan Turner led the way in the second half, when he scored 14 of his 16 points. The ever-reliable Macklin went for 15/10. Defensively, LSU forced the Hogs backcourt of Walker and Reed into 10-for-24 shooting.

St. Joe's and Boston College was the undercard game in Bloomington, tipping off in the early evening time slot. Both teams were cold and shot below 40 percent. Bagley struggled to a 4-for-14 night. Warrick was coming through for the Hawks, scoring twenty points, but no one else was producing.

The Eagles led 22-18 at the half and then no one could score for the first four minutes of the second half. St. Joe's, even with Warrick's big night, went a stretch of over eleven minutes and scored just three points.

But with Bagley struggling, BC was in no position to capitalize. The Eagles led this ugly affair 35-34 with 3:18 to go. Davis went to a spread. Under normal circumstances, this would be a highly questionable move. In this type of game, it made sense. If nothing else, maybe the spread could get Bagley on the foul line.

But it didn't work out. St. Joe's eventually nudged ahead 38-37 when Warrick scored off a Bagley turnover. The great Eagle guard didn't go quietly. Like Ainge the night before, he kept battling on an off-night. Bagley drilled a 22-footer to put his team back in front. After St. Joe's answered, Bagley drove hard to the hole, drew a foul and hit a couple free throws. Boston College led 41-40 and there was 0:46 on the clock.

St. Joe's ran it down. With about 15 seconds to play, Warrick got the ball in the corner, guarded heavily by Martin Clark. Warrick put on a nice pump fake that got Clark in the air and drew a foul. At the 0:12 mark, Warrick went to the line.

He hit the first one to tie the game. The second free throw bounced high against the back rim...hit the front rim...then went to the left side of the rim...and rolled in. It was as though fate was continuing to smile on St. Joe's, but Bagley was going to get one more chance. He got an open 12-footer. But he missed. Murphy got the rebound and there was still time. His five-footer missed. Finally, John Smith rebounded for St. Joe's and the 42-41 win was secure.

The folks in Bloomington had seen the best of both worlds in the first game—an exciting finish, and a game played in such a way that no rational person could have envisioned either one knocking off the Hoosiers. But Indiana still had to deal with UAB. Bartow had the Blazers ready and both teams gave the fans some offense. UAB led 25-19 midway through the first half with Robinson on his way to a 17-point night.

IU kicked into gear and ripped off a 19-6 run to get the lead going into the locker room. The Hoosiers kept UAB at arm's length through much of the second half, but with the lead fluctuating between six and ten points, there was still a chance for an upset.

It was Isiah who took things over. He hit three straight jump shots. Then he drew a couple fouls and hit all four free throws. By night's end, he had 27 points and eight assists. His backcourt mate Wittman scored 20. Tolbert held down the interior with 17 points and nine rebounds. Collectively, this trio made 22 of their 35 shots from the floor. The final was 87-72.

THE ELITE EIGHT: POWER RE-ESTABLISHED

Just as there's an ebb and flow to every game, there's also an ebb and flow to every bracket—part of which is a point when things stop and everyone can take their breath. In 1981, the Elite Eight was that moment.

Each game had a solid favorite—Virginia, North Carolina, LSU and Indiana—going up against a surprise team that was seeded sixth or lower—BYU, Kansas State, Wichita State and St. Joseph's. This might have been a weekend when the historic nature of this upset-laden field rolled on. Instead, it was the time when power began to assert itself.

Virginia had the most trouble of any of the favorites, trailing BYU 31-28 at the half. But Ainge was having another poor game, this one ending with 4-for-13 shooting. And there would be no redemption opportunity at the end. With just over 15 minutes to play, a Sampson dunk put the Cavs up 36-35. Ainge drew a technical for complaining about hanging on the rim. In reality the technical was due to the fact that Ainge, in his own words after the game, was “complaining too much.”

Sampson delivered an outstanding 22 points/12 rebounds/4 blocks performance. Lamp had his second straight good game here in Atlanta, knocking down 18 points and grabbing seven rebounds. Once Virginia had the lead, they kept on coming and pulled away to win 74-60. Lamp picked up the region's Most Outstanding Player award.

The other three heavyweights never gave the least sign of being troubled, all pulling out to leads of anywhere from 13-16 points by halftime and not being seriously challenged in the second half.

Al Wood led the way for North Carolina in Saturday's second game, with a dominant 21 points/17 rebounds performance that eclipsed Perkins' 16/11 line and Worthy's 15 points. Blackman played well for Kansas State with 21 points/10 rebounds. Randy Reed added 19 and Nealy went for 12.

But depth was a huge factor. Matt Doherty came off the Carolina bench and popped in 16. For K-State, the rest of the lineup outside their core trio, shot 7-for-30. The final was 82-68 and Wood was the region's MOP.

Indiana's home cooking sizzled, to the tune of 69 percent from the floor. Isiah focused on passing in this game, dishing 12 assists out to a balanced attack that was led by Turner and Tolbert getting 14 points apiece. St. Joe's came out in a zone—really, their only hope, because they weren't going to defend Isiah in a man-to-man. But the Hoosiers hit eight of their first nine shots and never stopped hitting, en route to a 78-46 demolition. Isiah picked up Outstanding Player honors.

It took LSU six minutes to get into high gear. Trailing 12-11, the Tigers ripped off a 19-2 run in a stretch that only took five minutes. Macklin got MOP honors with a 21/10 line that included 9-for-11 shooting. Cook hit nine of his ten shots. Mitchell scored 17. Martin was brilliant running the show, with 13 points and 10 assists. LSU shot 64 percent for the game. The Shockers, behind cold 13-for-33 shooting in the first half dug themselves a hole they couldn't get out of. LSU closed out their Final Four trip with a 96-85 win.

Macklin did suffer a dislocated finger in the second half, but it was on his non-shooting right hand. The Tigers were optimistic heading to Philadelphia. So were Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia. After this March of Madness, there were four elite teams ready to settle the national championship.

FINAL FOUR SATURDAY

Indiana-LSU

The perception of both teams, one that was fed by the pregame analysis from Al McGuire and Billy Packer on NBC, is that this was a contrast in styles. This theory held that Indiana wanted to play halfcourt and physical, while LSU was the more sleek and athletic team.

There was some truth to this—with Tolbert and Turner down low, Indiana definitely wanted to get physical with their opponents and would benefit if officials were slow with the whistle. Macklin and Carter gave LSU athleticism on the wings that IU couldn't match. But Isiah Thomas could certainly take care of himself if the tempo picked up. And no one was going to shove Greg Cook around *that* easily underneath.

Macklin's finger injury from the Elite Eight was a significant story, although LSU's star had taken off his bandage prior to tip off. On the Indiana side, Wittman was playing with a football pad to protect a bruised thigh.

The Tigers got the game's first bucket by going to Mitchell on the block for a quick turnaround. Isiah answered on the other end with a good drive to the baseline and then a reverse kickback to Turner for the jumper. It's the kind of pass Steve Nash would popularize 25 years later—take it down low into traffic by the basket and with seemingly no place to go, then find a seam to pass it back out. In 1981's game, Isiah's move stood out even more.

The early part of the game had a frenzied pace. LSU opened in a full-court trap that forced Isiah into a bad pass. But the next time, the Hoosiers easily broke the trap and got a layup on the other end. At the first TV timeout, five minutes in, we were tied 11-11.

LSU was the team with missed opportunity in this early stage, having turned it over four times. Dale Brown also had reason to be concerned about Macklin. He had missed three of four shots and could be seen holding his finger. To say nothing of the fact that Turner was dogging him fiercely.

But on the flip side, Ethan Martin was playing solid basketball at the point for LSU, more consistent than Isiah, even if the latter had added a couple nice dishes to Wittman for open jump shots to go with his early assist. Cook was also clogging up the interior of Indiana's offensive flow.

As play continued, LSU was getting the better of the rebounding battle, a 15-8 early edge that included nice work on the offensive glass. But they weren't converting the second shots into points. The Tigers nudged out to a 20-16 lead, but it felt like it could have been more.

Isiah picked up a couple early fouls. Knight opted to leave him in. At one point in the first half, Enberg noted that the players no longer had to raise their hands when they committed a foul, enabling quick identification from the scorer's bench and the TV crew.

McGuire defended the change saying that raising one's hand was demeaning to the players. Enberg and Packer each noted it was now more difficult for everyone—not just announcers and fans, but the official scorekeeper whose count actually mattered—to know who the foul was on. Listening to Al's fear about players being demeaned from the perspective of history, one can't help but wonder if this was where snowflake culture got its start.

Martin fed Howard Carter for a jump shot in transition that gave LSU a 26-21 lead with just under six minutes to go in the half. Isiah quickly answered with a basket of his own, then Tolbert scored on a baseline drive to cut the lead back to a point. The Hoosiers took a 27-26 lead when Tolbert secured a defensive rebound and then hit Isiah on a long downcourt pass. The shifty point guard laid it in with a sharp cut against the grain, to get space, the kind of move an NFL running back would have been proud of.

But the next sequence went decidedly against Indiana. After Carter hit a tough shot from 15 feet to put LSU back in front and Turner missed a layup, Isiah was whistled for his third foul. It was a reach-in on the ensuing fast break off the Turner miss. What's more, it looked like a bad call. The free throws put the Tigers up 30-27. There was 3:14 to go, Isiah was going to the bench and the Hoosiers were in a danger spot for the rest of this half.

Or maybe not. Jim Thomas was coming in. McGuire opined that while the difference between the two players was real, it wasn't dramatic. "Jimmy Thomas is a *ballplayer*", McGuire said with emphasis. From the perspective of history and what we know about Isiah, the statement looks absurd. In terms of where both players were at in 1981, it was not. And Jim Thomas would prove McGuire prescient.

Dale Brown certainly didn't see these last three minutes as a major opportunity. In fact, he went to the spread and tried to milk the clock. Some bad basketball both ways ensued. LSU traveled. Indiana ran a slow possession that saw multiple missed shots at the rim. After Isiah's third foul, nobody scored again. The 30-27 score held to halftime.

LSU was holding a 21-13 rebounding edge, with Tolbert mostly quiet. We would later learn that Knight had a few words for Tolbert in the locker room. On television, McGuire was imploring the Hoosier forward to shoot the jump shot the Tigers were giving him, that it was necessary to get Cook away from the basket.

On IU's first possession of the half, Tolbert chose to ignore McGuire's plea to shoot, passing on an open jump shot. But the big forward heard his coach's demands to get more aggressive. Tolbert finished the possession by jamming home an offensive rebound. Then his frontcourt mate, Turner, already busy forcing Macklin into what Packer called "a bad, bad day", scored on consecutive possessions. Tolbert secured a defensive rebound and Turner tipped it in on the other end. *This* was the physical Indiana that was expected in the pregame analysis.

Then, with all the momentum, Isiah picked up his fourth foul. There was still 16:33 to go in the game. Jim Thomas would have a lot on his shoulders.

The tough reserve guard was up to the challenge and would do yeoman's work all afternoon on defense and running the halfcourt offense. In the meantime, the twin Ts—Tolbert and Turner—were on fire. Turner hit another jumper. The Hoosiers got seven of the first eight rebounds in the second half. An 11-0 run gave them a 38-30 lead.

A little over five minutes into the second half, Martin broke the dry spell. It was still just a six-point game. But soon after, he picked up his own fourth foul. Both point guards were out. Indiana had better depth.

Now it was time for the Hoosier shooters to step up. Kitchel knocked one down from the right side. A big offensive rebound from Jim Thomas, where he seemed to literally swoop in to keep the ball alive, then save it as it was going out of bounds, set up a basket from Wittman. The lead was 44-34.

Tolbert wasn't just rebounding, he was now making Mitchell's life miserable when LSU had the ball. Wittman and Kitchel each hit another perimeter shot. The lead grew to 52-36. The second-half rebounding margin was up to 17-4 in favor of Indiana. The Hoosier defense had completely broken down LSU's offensive rhythm, with Martin's absence making it look even worse. Everything looked disorganized and unstructured. Nothing came easy. Macklin finished the day 2-for-12 and turned it over four times. Mitchell only made three of his ten shots.

On the flip side, Turner finished the game with 20 points and eight rebounds. Jim Thomas ended up with nine rebounds off the bench. Even though both teams shot in the thirties, percentage-wise, Indiana got the better of turnovers—forcing 19 and only committing ten and in the second half, they simply got more shots. The Hoosiers coasted into Monday night's title game with a 67-49 win.

North Carolina-Virginia

Round Three of the ACC rivalry was on the late afternoon marquee. The frontcourt talent was the story, the individual play of Sampson against the collective excellence of North Carolina's trio. Looking back decades later, we have the benefit of knowing Worthy was actually the single best player on the floor. But at the time, the thought Sampson could end up the greatest basketball player of all-time was alive and well, and fed by McGuire.

Even with 1981 knowledge, we knew Al Wood was a great scorer. Enberg noted in the pregame that one of the underlying stories of this Final Four was Wood's pursuit of the 2,000-point club for career scoring. The odds were against him, needing 42 points. No one could have imagined how much of that he would get today.

Both teams came out in zone defenses and both offenses looked sluggish on the attack. Jimmy Black picked up two quick fouls, making him the third starting point guard today to get in foul trouble. North Carolina did not have a deep bench, so Dean Smith had to trust his point guard to play smart and stay in the game.

Othell Wilson had his own set of problems, although they had nothing to do with fouls, or even his play in general. In an accidental collision on screen, Wilson's face collided straight into Wood's shoulder.

North Carolina's defensive strategy was no secret coming in and not hard to discern in the game's early minutes. When Ralph Sampson touched the ball, a sea of blue came down on him. Virginia was going to have to shoot over the zone. But after an early corner jumper from Lamp, there were a lot of missed shots. North Carolina was similarly struggling.

McGuire noted that for all the great players on the front line, the winner of this game would likely be the one that found a perimeter game from their guards. Wilson knocked down three buckets in the first part of the first half. Seven minutes in, Virginia led 10-6.

Wood also had six points in this early stage. But the Cavs appeared to be the ones getting their perimeter people settled in. Lee Raker came off the bench and scored. The Tar Heels had no one besides Wood contributing to their offense. But as the clock crossed the ten-minute mark, Wilson was called for his third foul. The officials had completed the sweep—all four point guards, Isiah, Ethan Martin, Black and now Wilson—had their afternoons marred with foul trouble.

North Carolina took advantage and nudged out to a 27-25 lead as the first half was winding down. Then Virginia's Jeff Jones aired it out from behind the NBA's three-point arc (the only three-point arc on the court in this era) to tie it up going into the locker room.

Virginia got the first three points of the second half. It was 30-27, and marked the second straight game a team would lead by that score and then see a game get away from them. But that wasn't the corollary the NBC crew was focused on. They were understandably more attuned to whether or not the Cavs were about to do what Indiana did in the first game, and that's set the tone with a dominant start to the second half.

Black quickly calmed the waters for UNC when he hit a shot that hit high off the rim, bounced off the backboard and in. Worthy made a nice feed off the baseline to Perkins who finished at the rim and converted a three-point play. North Carolina was ahead 34-30 at the 16-minute mark.

The Virginia offense was really bogging down, Sampson unable to get free. A future generation of basketball, one that was more creative with the use of big men, would have let Ralph step outside and shoot. Terry Holland stayed with the time-honored strategy of insisting his big man stay down low and in fairness to Holland, there wasn't much—if any—precedent for operating any differently.

Now down 36-30, it was the Cavs suddenly in danger. But Raker stepped up with a big shot from the left side to break the momentum. Then, trailing 37-34, Raker got a nice dish from Lamp, scored down low and was fouled. Raker was up to eleven points and his free throw tied the game, 37-all. Black put the Tar Heels back on top with a nice pull-up jumper just beyond the free throw line.

Now it was Al Wood time. He rebounded a Virginia miss on the other end. Then he started making history.

Wood hit a perimeter jumper in spite of being fouled on the release. Defensively, he chased down another rebound. Combined, he and Worthy were attacking the glass in the second half, much like Turner and Tolbert had done for Indiana in the early game. Sampson was passive.

Wood scored again, drew the foul and finished the three-point play. After a Sampson turnover, Wood hit from 15 with a defender draped all over him. Wood had seven straight points, the UNC lead was 46-37 and there were just over ten minutes to play.

With no time to lose, Holland put Wilson back in the game. It didn't stop Wood from scoring again, this time in transition. It was another 11-0 run in the second half. Like Indiana, North Carolina was in control. Did Virginia have any push back?

Jones hit a jumper from the baseline to break the Cavs' dry spell. After a defensive stop, he scored again, this time right over Woods and the long arms of Perkins, drawing a foul in the process. The free throw cut the lead back to a manageable 48-42.

Wood promptly got the ball, went hard to the basket on the left side and banked it in. He was drawn for a charge, but the basket correctly counted. The lead was back to eight. Nine minutes to go.

Virginia wouldn't roll over and the North Carolina zone, while effective and doing its job, didn't have the same smothering effect that Indiana's ruthless man-to-man had in the early game. Raker scored off a nice pass from Sampson. Jones scored. But in between, no one was stopping Al Wood, who got a bucket of his own, and raised his total for the day to 28 points.

It was 52-46. No one rooting for North Carolina was going to be comfortable under any circumstances, but even less so considering some historical circumstances. The Tar Heels had been in command in the second half against McGuire's Marquette team in the 1977 title game, UNC's last visit to the Final Four. They lost by eight. More to the point for this season, UNC had blown double-digit leads in the second half against Virginia in both meetings.

North Carolina scored, got a defensive stop and then began slowing the pace. The "BORING!" chant rained down from Virginia fans. A year later, in the ACC Tournament final, a North Carolina stall against Virginia would change college basketball forever by getting a shot clock put in place. But this wasn't an all-out stall. Packer noted the players weren't spread out in the classic "Four Corners" setup and that Smith, dealing with a short bench, was probably just trying to get his players some rest.

The game hung on the eight-point margin and reached 60-52, the clock now under five minutes. Virginia, feeling the urgency, applied some defensive pressure. Lamp forced a turnover, but the Cavs couldn't turn it into points. At the other end, Wood took a feed at the basket, scored and got fouled. With the free throw, he was up to 33 points. And the game was all but over.

Virginia didn't shoot well—43 percent from the floor on the afternoon. While Lamp scored 18, it came at the price of 7-for-18 shooting. Jones ended up 5-for-13. Only Raker, who finished with 13, hit consistently from the outside.

Sampson was unable to make an impact. He collected nine rebounds, but ended up with just eleven points on 3-for-10 shooting. Defensively, he was whistled for three goaltends in the second half.

But the ultimate story of the day was Martin Alphonzo "Al" Wood. He was chasing Jerry West's national semifinal record of 38 points. Wood also nearly injured himself in the process. After a missed layup by Black in transition, Wood skied so high for the rebound that he overextended his shoulder and had to have it popped back into place. Fortunately, there was no damage.

And with two free throws in the final twenty seconds, Wood reached 39 points—on 14-for-19 shooting. West's record had fallen. The final was 78-65. The last battle between two men, Dean Smith and Bob Knight, already seen as great coaches in 1981 and known today as legends of the sport—was set for Monday night.

MONDAY NIGHT: INDIANA VS. NORTH CAROLINA

The storylines were abundant. Dean chasing his first national championship. Knight looking to win his second, and at the same Philadelphia Spectrum that he had completed his undefeated season at in 1976. Both teams had terrific front lines, but there was a contrast between Indiana's power and North Carolina's silky finesse. Knight's man-to-man defense against Dean and his multiple zones.

But in the hours leading up to the game, the biggest storyline developed a couple hours south in Washington D.C.

Ronald Reagan, barely more than two months into his first term as President, was shot in an assassination attempt. Throughout the afternoon, there was uncertainty as to the president's condition. The Academy Awards, also scheduled for tonight, was postponed. The NCAA was prepared to do the same, right up until an hour before tipoff.

Reagan's condition changed for the better. His comment to First Lady Nancy Reagan "Honey, I forgot to duck" and remarks to his doctors "I hope you're all Republicans" became legendary as a display of humor in the face of grave adversity. They also did not reveal how close Reagan had come to death.

By the late afternoon and early evening, the president's condition stabilized. The NCAA made the decision to play.

Consequently, NBC's introduction, while still including their standard theme song *This Is It*, by Kenny Loggins, was carried on a more sober tone to respect the moment. Bryant Gumbel, the pregame show host, emphasized that there was nothing more to be reported about the terrible events from the nation's capital and that if anything changed, viewers would be immediately taken to the NBC news desk.

The public address announcer, prior to announcing the starting lineups, informed the crowd that Reagan's condition was good, drawing a round of applause from everyone. This was followed by a prayer for the health of the president. There was a six-minute moment of silence.

Enberg, McGuire and Packer gently shifted to the discussion of the basketball game ahead. The way the game would be officiated was seen as key. Tolbert and Turner needed to be allowed to get physical. But if officials did blow a quick whistle, the Hoosier bench—epitomized by Jim Thomas—was deeper than what the Tar Heels had in reserve.

There was early foul trouble for Indiana, but it came from Kitchel, who picked up two quick ones. McGuire felt the officials wanted to establish control of the game early. Offensively, the Hoosier offense again started sluggish. They were sloppy against the Carolina zone. The IU pressure man-to-man was causing UNC their own set of problems, but it was that same pressure that led to Kitchel getting those fouls by guarding Perkins far away from the basket. North Carolina took an early 8-2 lead.

The overplaying man-to-man defense of Indiana started to reap some benefits. Isiah hit a pull-up bucket in transition, Tolbert banked one in off the glass and six straight Hoosier points tied the score.

A basket from Wood put the Tar Heels back in front and also vaulted Wood to the 2,000-point threshold. UNC got on a little run. Wittman, playing tentatively, turned it over and Black turned it into a breakaway basket. The North Carolina guards were really backing off Isiah, determined not to let the IU point guard create and instead make him prove he could hit the jumper.

Isiah was missing early on. Another Wood basket got the UNC run out to eight straight points and a 16-8 lead. "It's all Carolina at the moment," Enberg informed viewers as the first half moved past the ten-minute mark.

Turner brought down a tough offensive rebound and put it back to break the Indiana dry spell. Jim Thomas, now into the game, knocked down a baseline jumper to get the lead down to four.

McGuire was urging Wittman to shoot, that his perimeter game would be key to breaking open the North Carolina zone. The Indiana two-guard started taking the advice. Trailing 20-14, he hit a couple outside shots sandwiched around Isiah's dish to Turner for an open dunk in the halfcourt set. We were tied 20-20.

Worthy was playing aggressively and well on the interior for North Carolina. He scored twice himself. There was a terrific back-and-forth going on between these two great teams and we were in a 22-22 tie as the clock moved to four minutes.

North Carolina moved out 25-22 on another basket from Worthy. The sophomore forward was up to seven points. Then he picked up his third foul on what was a very ticky-tack call that Isiah helped draw with a little acting. Worthy had to go to the bench and he was not the same player the rest of the game. His final stat line of 3-for-11 from the field and four turnovers obscures how well he was playing before the fouls forced him to the sidelines.

The Tar Heels led 25-24 and had the ball with 1:33 left. Packer noted that the Hoosiers' extended defense was forcing UNC players further apart and the passing lanes were getting wider. "It's asking for a turnover", the analyst said. As if on cue, North Carolina threw it away. Jim Thomas kept the ensuing possession alive with a spectacular save under his own basket. Turner ended up getting fouled and hitting one free throw to pull IU back even.

North Carolina was winding the clock down. Wood got fouled and hit one free throw. There were still just over ten seconds left. Isiah came up the floor, demonstrating remarkable patience. He let the pass go with about four seconds left to an open Wittman on the right baseline. Wittman knocked it down. Indiana by a point at the half.

Indiana had finished the half strong, but the North Carolina zone, along with the underrated Black, were causing problems for Isiah. He was only 1-for-7 and had committed a couple turnovers. The Hoosiers needed him to get his game turned around. And in the opening moments of the second half, that's exactly what happened.

On the opening possession, Black dropped a pass, Isiah quickly scooped it up and raced the other way for a basket, a routine underhanded finish that wound up on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Carolina got the ball to Perkins for an alley-oop, a failure of help side defense that undoubtedly infuriated Knight. But Isiah first created a basket by penetrating and dishing to Turner for a layup. Then he scored one by intercepting a pass on the other end and going coast-to-coast. The Hoosiers led 33-28 and the two steals by Thomas were what Dean Smith later called the game's turning point.

Tolbert forced an errant pass, the 13th turnover for North Carolina against only five for Indiana. Wittman hit another outside shot. Even though Black hit a baseline jumper to make it 35-30, North Carolina's offense looked frenzied and hurried—much like LSU's had in the second half on Saturday.

The Hoosiers were gaining steam. Isiah scored again. With Dean hoping to make it to the TV timeout that would come on the next dead ball, Tolbert blocked a shot and Indiana scored. It was 39-30, there was 15:30 to go and Dean had no choice. He needed to call a timeout of his own.

McGuire called for the ball to be put in Wood's hand. Smith agreed. Wood scored on a goaltend by Tolbert. On North Carolina's next possession, Black hit from the outside. But on the other end, Turner hit a nice little jump hook on the lane. A very patient and deliberate possession ended with an Isiah basket. The score was 45-34 and there was a little over twelve minutes left. Indiana "can do little wrong!" exclaimed Enberg.

The oppressive Indiana defense had North Carolina uncomfortable enough that the Tar Heels also started making unforced errors. There were dropped passes. There were questionable decisions. They were looking desperate. The score and the clock surely accounted for the desperation, but just as notable is that North Carolina was just making one pass and then either putting the ball on the floor or forcing a shot. It's exactly what Knight hoped to achieve, getting the Heels away from the masterful ball movement that Smith coached.

Worthy picked up his fourth foul, but stayed in the game. North Carolina got to within 45-38 on a Wood tip-in. This was still a game and the Carolina crowd came to life. The Tar Heel defense picked up full court in a hard man-to-man. Indiana broke it with ease and Wittman got a layup. Black missed from point-blank range on the other end, but with a chance to move the lead back into double digits, Tolbert turned it over. There was 6:49 to go. Indiana was in control, but this wasn't finished yet.

Jim Thomas skied for a defensive rebound amidst the big men. On the other end, Isiah drove, put it up and got the roll. The lead was back to eleven.

Indiana had another chance to extend the lead, but Worthy came up with a steal and beautiful pass on the fast break to Wood, who drew the foul. It was the fifth on Turner. The Hoosier big man hadn't been as dominant as Saturday, but he still finished the night with a 12/6 line. And McGuire pointed out that at this stage of the game, it might have been just as well. Steve Risley,

who replaced Turner, was nowhere near as good an overall player, but Risley was a better ball-handler for when Knight decided to spread out the offense.

The margin was ten, 49-39 at the 5:30 mark when Indiana turned it over. But UNC missed a shot and Worthy fouled out going for the offensive rebound. The Hoosier offense was deliberate and patient. They drained the clock down to four minutes, the Tar Heel defense clearly looking gassed as they chased the ball. Isiah finished the perfect possession with a basket.

At 51-41 with three minutes to go, North Carolina came up with a steal. But Wood missed, Risley rebounded and got fouled. It had the feel of a dagger moment and that feeling permeated the broadcast discussion, which started to interject valid points about Dean Smith's excellence, even without a national title and Knight's new place in history with multiple rings. The final score would end up 63-50.

Indiana finished with steady statistical edges across the board, not dominant in any category, but better in all of them. Tolbert ended with eleven rebounds. Wittman finished with 16 points on 7-for-13 shooting. After his miserable first half, Isiah ended with 23 points on 8-for-17 from the floor.

Wood ended with 18 points on 6-for-13 shooting, a respectable performance. Perkins had an 11/8 line, but it was quiet and he rarely seemed to impact the game. North Carolina's depth problems were underscored by Matt Doherty's six turnovers off the bench.

Isiah was named the player of the game by NBC and he was voted Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four. With his great second half, he deserved the former. But I'd like to offer a dissenting view on the latter. The story of the weekend in its totality was the dominance of Tolbert and Turner against some genuinely outstanding front lines.

The MOP is supposed to be an award for both games and that's something that was taken more seriously in voting in 1981 than is the case today. I'd have voted for Turner, whose combined stat line was 32/13 and that doesn't include some outstanding defense.

Indiana's nine losses were the most ever for a champion, something that underscores how different the college basketball landscape was at the time. But they were no Cinderella. This was a team that had been surging down the stretch of the regular season.

Even allowing the gutted bracket they inherited at the Mideast Regional, it's tough to imagine either Kentucky or DePaul stopping this team from getting to the Final Four. Then, here in Philadelphia, they had beaten two outstanding teams by a combined 31 points.

It was a complete display of dominance and peaking at the right time. Enberg drew on a phrase horse racing people use to describe a great horse. "Much the best", is what they call a top stallion. "Indiana was 'much the best'", Enberg said.

And so it was that a tournament that had been defined by chaos, ended with an unflinching demonstration of excellence.