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Final Four

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If you are a lifer in Minnesota you are having the Final Four experience for the first time. As a Minnesotan-in-exile and an alumnus of Marquette University and Florida State University I have had the Final Four experience on other occasions. As a Gopher alumnus, however, it is a new and exciting experience.

For all my misgivings about college basketball, the Final Four, the hype, the money, the commercialism and the corruption, I still got into it when the Maroon and Gold went two overtimes to beat Clemson and then came from behind to end UCLA's dreams of another national championship.

It is a tribute to the coaching of Clem Haskins that his team concept, both offensively and defensively, has done so well. The beauty of the run is that it has been a nine man effort on the floor. It is also clear that Coach Haskins is truly loved by his players, and it would be nice to see the man who coached so well at Western Kentucky in the shadow of the University of Kentucky, beat the team from Lexington on the way to a national championship.

The post-game interview following the Minnesota-UCLA battle featured one of my all-time favorite college basketball coaches, and one of the great characters in the history of the game. Al McGuire, who was starting his career at Marquette University when I was a graduate student there, was in great form Sunday on CBS. In addition to the genuine outpouring of affection for Clem Haskins-that was a hug of bearish proportions-Al went into a dance with one of the Gopher players, and then jawed with several others. He was having a great time, and the Minnesota players were learning from the master what fun at the NCAA tournament really means.

His phrases are wonderful and some have entered the language. "He is an aircraft carrier." "He put up a Hail Mary." "That shot was a crier." "It's lights out." "That's all she wrote." "Pick up the hymnals, mass is over." And on Sunday, "One, two, three. Johnny ride the pony."

For all of his zaniness, Al McGuire is a serious man who lives by a street philosophy that seems part New York hustler and part Jesuitical logic, with a dose of Irish mysticism. McGuire understood the inner-city athlete of the mid-Sixties and early Seventies as well as anyone in America. In part the

understanding was a result of his own experiences as a New York street kid, in part because he is man of deep emotions capable of considerable empathy.

When he recruited players at Marquette he used all the tricks of the trade. He would have the name of the player put up on the marquee at the campus theater, he made certain that the recruit was taken to parties attended by less than virginal coeds, and he showed the recruit the Milwaukee Arena where Marquette played its games, but didn't let them near the old gym, vintage 1910, where all the practices were held.

Most important for Al was the time he spent with the recruit. Always he would take the young man on a walk around the campus and into the neighborhoods surrounding the campus or the adjacent downtown area. McGuire said that walking induced conversation, never a problem for him, and it was in these moments that he got an excellent sense of the young man, while the recruit got a full dose of the Al McGuire worldview. Al stressed to each recruit that this was his opportunity to move up the social ladder in America, not by playing basketball, but by using his basketball talents to get both a degree and an education.

When a player came to Marquette in the McGuire era they were guaranteed the right to stay on after their basketball eligibility ended, and retain a scholarship until they earned their degree, no matter how long that took. Some were six or seven years finishing, but most of McGuire's players at Marquette did complete their degree programs. Al was committed to winning basketball, but he also believed deeply in the American dream that education would move you up in the world, and he believed that basketball provided his players a chance to capitalize on that opportunity.

Marquette players were monitored for class attendance and their progress was checked regularly. The athletic department never once, in the time I was there, pressured anyone on grades, even when one of the better players was caught cheating on a history exam. When University administrators learned of the incident the punishment given out exceeded that which the History professor would have given. And never once in the entire process did the athletic department, the head basketball coach, or anyone else connected with the university try to bring any pressure on the two graduate students who had uncovered the guilty student.

Such is not the case at other institutions I have been or of which I have knowledge. This is one of the many reasons I greatly admire Al McGuire. It is also why I am happy to see him still enjoying the game.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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