

The Final Four: History and Pressure

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Sport and Society

Are you feeling like you have been run over by a truck on the road to the Final Four? Does the road to the Final Four go through your living room? Are you beginning to think that Billy Packer is robosportscaster? Do you have any idea why Curry Kirkpatrick is on the sidelines, or Mike Francesa is in the studio? Do you care? Well, as Dick Vitale says, "It's time to take a T.O. baby."

The Final Four, the Road to Minneapolis, or New Orleans, or Seattle, or Indianapolis, or wherever there is a domed stadium that seats more people than can possibly see the game but are willing to shell out big bucks, has become a monster that only a TV executive or NCAA official could love. And does CBS love it! The NCAA has graciously allowed CBS to go away at time-outs for 2 minutes and 15 seconds, an increase of thirty seconds over last year, and 1:15 over ancient times. Why? The better to sell more advertising my dear. And from the standpoint of the NCAA a great and grand argument for increasing TV rights fees at the next round of contract negotiations with the TV executives. This also explains why games have been dragging on into the wee hours of the morning in the Eastern Time Zone.

I can remember a time not too long ago when it was nearly impossible to get the Final Four on TV, let alone any regional game not involving a local powerhouse team. In 1963 the tremendous championship game in which Chicago Loyola upset Cincinnati, 60-58 in overtime, was not available in large sections of the country. It was such a great game however that a replay was shown the next day to most of the nation. In 1966 the now legendary Texas El-Paso v. Kentucky game, the all-black v. the all-white team, was not available outside the big cities. I was in Milwaukee that year and I remember how a friend and I desperately tuned a radio trying to get Caywood Ledford's broadcast of the game on WHAS out of Louisville. We listened to the now legendary game on a fade-in, fade-out basis. The nearest available television was in Chicago.

It was somewhere in this period that the Final Four emerged from the shadows to attract national attention. It was also the year that interrupted UCLA's dominance of the Final Four. The Bruins had won the national championship the previous two years, and would go on to win the next seven years, and eight out of the next nine years. The remarkable run of UCLA under John Wooden

captured the imagination of the nation, and put the national spotlight on the Final Four.

The first Final Four occurred in 1939 when Oregon beat Ohio State 46-33 for the championship. The tournament was not a big thing, and the NIT was still a more prestigious event. The 1939 tournament lost \$2,531 for the NCAA.

Fifty years later in 1989 the NCAA took away profits for itself of \$23,577,259, out of total receipts of \$66.3M for the NCAA Basketball tournament. Each final four team took home \$1.25M that year. First round teams took home \$274,000. In 1990 Final Four teams took home \$1.37M.

What began as a college basketball championship has become one of the most lucrative sports events in the United States or the world. It has also become one of the plums of the television industry. In 1989 CBS shocked many in the sports world, who still think in terms of sport rather than business, by signing a seven year contract with the NCAA for \$1B. That is \$143M per year, an increase of \$90M from the previous year. While many raised their eyebrows, CBS raised its profits, reporting 1990 first quarter profits up \$30M, due in large part to the NCAA deal.

What has all of this meant for college basketball? Certainly more exposure for more programs and greater parity of competition. It has increased the dollars flowing into athletic budgets, and in some rare cases even academic budgets of the universities. It has also meant a tremendous increase in the pressure on college basketball coaches. When a team reaches the first round one year it is expected to reach it again the next, and perhaps go further. With each advance the income goes up, and with each advance Athletic Directors and budget people have a tendency to write these figures into school budgets as presumed revenue for the following year. If a team does not get into the tournament, or does not advance far enough, an athletic budget deficit results, and when the numbers are into the six and seven figure range, the pressure on coaches increases geometrically.

This kind of pressure leads to coaches cutting corners on recruiting, pushing down the academic levels of acceptance, and becoming paranoid figures on campus and with the media. If coaches sometimes act as if they are under siege, it is because they are. If it seems some coaches will stop at nothing to win, it is because they must win or they will become ex-coaches. And

if some coaches develop warped and arrogant personalities, and display the advanced stages of mental illness, we should not be surprised.

And when the highly successful coaches come to be larger than their programs, a law unto themselves on their campuses, obnoxious and disgusting human beings, we should stop and remember that this is what the pressure to win has wrought. And then we should pause, reflect on the situation, and be thankful that all coaches are not like Bobby Knight.

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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