

We All We Got

PITT

BASKETBALL

IN THE

GOLDEN ERA

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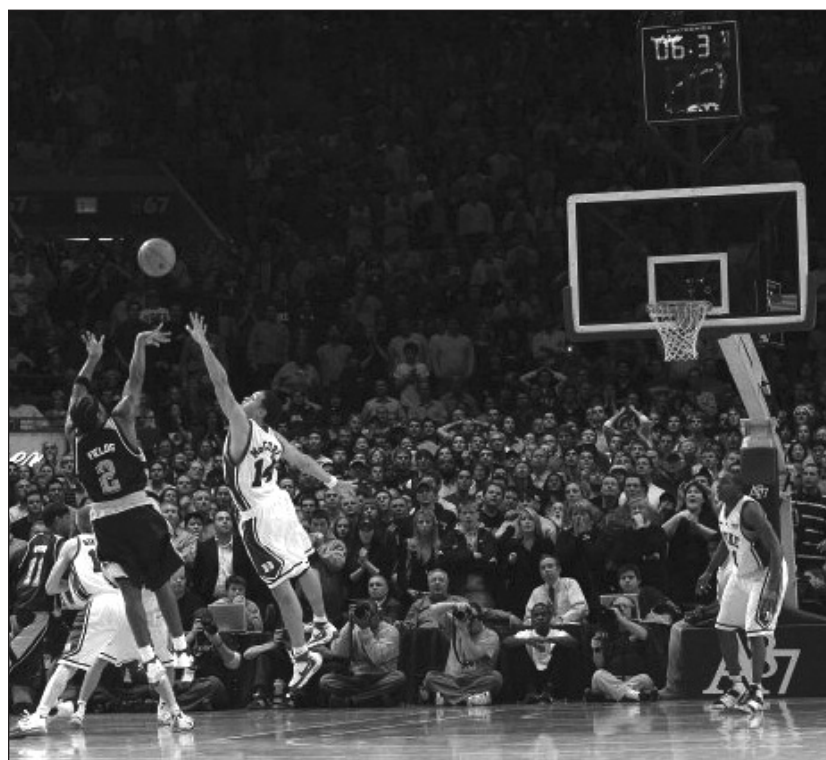
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We All We Got

PITT
BASKETBALL
IN THE
GOLDEN ERA

MICHAEL E. LOWENSTEIN

FOREWORD BY:
MARK A. NORDENBERG
CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH



D E D I C A T I O N

As I went through my Pitt basketball message board “posts” of the past seven years, I was reminded of the old joke of one of those folksy Southern coaches, Abe Lemons or somebody, about the player who comes into the coach’s office to ask what he should do about his grades, which were four Fs and a D:

“Son, I think you are spending too much time on that one subject.”

Still, as I looked back over them, I thought there was something there, something we had experienced. So I set about to edit some of the posts I liked the best, to make them shorter—which at times you will find hard to believe—and a little more readable. Or to see if I could make a point a little better than I made it at the time. I believe I have retained the essence of these posts and certainly tried to do so.

I have added some comments in italics before each post, and occasionally inside a post, to provide context. For the same reason, I included the dates and scores of some of the games, not all of them, but the ones that I felt were most important.

I struggled over the title for months. It finally came to me

right after I finished the first draft. “We All We Got” was a slogan of the 2003-2004 Pitt Panther basketball team. Many “educated” people I know would throw that back at me as an example of the kind of kids Pitt had playing basketball, the kind they would never have at “their” schools.

To me it was pure and it was perfect, from the first time I heard it. I have special memories of a trip to New Jersey that spring to see Pitt in the Sweet 16, a trip where my father took us to see his parents’ graves outside Newark, me for the first time since my grandmother died in 1980, and him maybe for the last time, and then we all went back—my parents, my family, and my sister down from Boston and her family—and put on our “We All We Got” shirts and went to watch Pitt play Oklahoma State.

When I told my wife that I was putting these posts into a book, and that this is what I had been doing in the basement all this time, she laughed and rolled her eyes. I told her that I had a title and she laughed and rolled her eyes again and said, “Let’s hear it.” I told her, and she paused, and she stopped rolling her eyes and she said, “That’s good...That really is good.”

This is for my family. We all we got.

FOREWORD

In March of 2003, I attended the first and second round games of the NCAA men's basketball tournament in Boston. It was a terrific weekend for University of Pittsburgh fans. Our Panthers beat Wagner by 26 points in their first round game and completed their run through the bracket with a decisive 22-point win over the Indiana Hoosiers, a traditional basketball power.

While walking through a Fleet Center concourse on the night of the Wagner game, I had a chance meeting with my long-time friend Martha Munsch. More than twenty-five years earlier, Martha and I had occupied offices next to each other while serving as young members of the Pitt law faculty. Even after she left the academic life to return to private practice, I enjoyed regular contact with Martha, who did legal work for the University and later served as a Pitt Trustee.

There is another side to Martha that I also came to know quite well. As an undergraduate student, she was the first woman to serve as sports editor of *The Pitt News*. And as a young mother, she reportedly named her son "Dan" in honor of legendary Panther quarterback Dan Marino. As those bits of history suggest, at every stage of her life, Martha has been one of Pitt's most knowledgeable and passionate fans.

When Martha first asked, in that concourse conversation, if I

knew her law firm partner Mike Lowenstein, who also was attending the tournament, I attached no particular significance to the question. However, her follow-up caught my attention. “You are not going to believe Mike,” she exclaimed, “because you have never met a more committed Pitt fan!” Frankly, I thought that I had been exposed to the ultimate in fan loyalty through my exposure to Martha herself and was not sure if I should consider her description of Mike to be welcoming or a warning.

Before long, though, I had the chance to judge for myself. I not only met Mike but worked closely with him. During our “time of troubles” with the ACC, Mike served as a lead litigator for the Big East Conference. As a client who also has been a lawyer, a law professor and a law school dean, I can report that he did a fabulous job. I quickly came to respect him as a professional, to like him as a person—and, as Martha Munsch had predicted, to be amazed by his level of commitment as a fan.

To put that statement in proper context, let me make clear that Mike possesses none of the negative qualities that frame stereotypes of the uncontrollably rabid fan. He understands that college athletes are moving through a period of personal growth and extends to them a suitable measure of patience. He realizes that most coaches actually do know more than he does—about their sport and about their team—and is willing to give them some benefit of the doubt even when he disagrees

with their decisions. And he knows how to accept a loss with dignity, whatever internal pain it may have brought to him.

The book that Mike has written chronicles what he has labeled the “Golden Era” of Pitt basketball. It is an era that began earlier in this decade and that continues today. It is an era that has unfolded in a spectacular new facility, the John M. and Gertrude E. Petersen Events Center. It is an era that was shaped by two outstanding coaches, Jamie Dixon and Ben Howland. And it is an era that was built by committed players, whose hard-work and team-first approach enabled them to triumph with a level of consistency that has been among the best in the country and that exceeded even their considerable talent levels.

It also is an era that has brought great pleasure to a large number of fans. Some of them—like Martha Munsch, Michael Lowenstein and Mark Nordenberg—had lived loyally through many earlier seasons when championships seemed out of reach. Others were comparatively new to Pitt basketball and had been given a first opportunity to follow the team when the construction of the Petersen Center virtually doubled the number of seats available on game-day.

Today, that large fan base probably is best known for “the Oakland Zoo,” the students who have helped make being at “the Pete” more joyful for the Panthers, more challenging for their opponents and more fun for everyone else. The crowds

also include more mature individuals—faculty, staff and alumni from Pitt, as well as fans from the broader community. And, of course, that fan base extends to families who follow the fortunes of the Panthers together. Among these families are the Lowensteins.

This book, then, also is their story—a story of bonding through basketball. Theirs is a family that not only attends almost every home game but travels to many away games. It is a family that seems to understand when Mike, who already has seen a game in person, invests further time in watching recorded replays. It is a family that has found joy in sharing the Pitt basketball experience with each other, and I am very glad that Mike has made the effort, through this book, to share that experience with others as well.

*Mark A. Nordenberg
Chancellor
University of Pittsburgh
January 2009*

P R O L O G U E

Basketball was a new game in the 20th century and the University of Pittsburgh played it like everybody else. But most of the time they did not play it very well.

There was, I'm told, a great run in the late 1920s with three-time All-American Charles Hyatt and Coach Doc Carlson, at a time when there was a jump ball after every basket. A Final Four team in 1941, even if there were only eight teams in the tournament. In the 1950s, a wonderful little guard from Wampum, Pennsylvania named Don Hennon, who once made the same All-American team as Wilt Chamberlain, Oscar Robertson and Elgin Baylor.

Many years later, in 1974, my senior year of high school, an honest-to-goodness terrific Pitt team, one that won 22 games in a row led by future NBA All-Star Billy Knight and the invention of something called the "amoeba defense." That Pitt team reached the regional finals, much later known as the Elite Eight. There they played N.C. State in a game best known for the great David Thompson jumping so high that he hit his foot on the shoulder of his 6-8 N.C. State teammate Phil Spence. Thompson landed on his head with such a hollow thud that everyone in the arena and watching on television gasped at the possibility that the best college basketball player in the country had just died on the court. By the time he returned from the hospital to the bench, to the relief of all,

his head swathed in bandages, an inspired N.C. State had broken open a close game. They went on to win the national championship.

A few other pretty good teams and some fine players, and that was about it for the first 80 years of Pitt basketball. Then, in the early 1980s, at a time when Pitt was riding a wave of national prominence in football, Pitt joined the Big East basketball conference and made a serious effort to energize its long-middling basketball program.

It began with a small parade of what were then known as “High School All-Americans,” starting in 1983 with Curtis Aiken from Buffalo. A year later, Demetreus Gore arrived from Detroit, along with the signature recruit of the era, 6-10 Charles Smith of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who would make All-American and play on the Olympic team before a long NBA career. The next year, one more, perhaps the most memorable. Jerome Lane, from Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary’s, the school that, many years later, would produce LeBron James. Jerome Lane came to Pitt hoping to play point guard and ended up leading the country in rebounding. He once explained that he might as well rebound since he was under the basket anyway. Lane still is fondly recalled in basketball circles for the night he sailed in from the right wing and threw one down with such force that he shattered the backboard, an event also remembered for Bill Raftery’s famous call of “Send it in Jerome!”

It took awhile for them to grow up, and it took a toll on Coach

Roy Chipman, who left in 1986. Paul Evans came over from Navy, where his team, led by David Robinson, had just reached the Elite Eight. The Evans era began well. After a 15-14 record in Chipman's last year, Pitt shot up to the top of the Big East. In Evans's second year, 1987-88, Pitt won the Big East regular season championship, its first ever, on my 31st birthday, when Lane had 29 points and 15 rebounds in the Carrier Dome against Syracuse star and future first pick in the NBA draft, Derrick Coleman.

Pitt entered the NCAA Tournament that year as a Number 2 seed, handled Eastern Michigan in Lincoln, Nebraska and, after a struggle, it appeared they would get past a good Vanderbilt team in the second round. Vanderbilt was fouling and shooting three-pointers to try and catch up, but Pitt was making most of their foul shots. Vanderbilt still trailed by three points with only seconds to play. With a win, Pitt would play Kansas, a team which, according to its own coach, Larry Brown, did not match up with Pitt at all.

Here, the facts get murky. Afterward, Paul Evans would claim that he told the Pitt players to foul Vanderbilt before they could shoot a tying three-pointer. Lane later said that Evans did not call for a foul but that his young assistant, John Calipari, did. Whatever did or did not happen in that huddle, what happened on the court was clear enough: Pitt did not foul, Vanderbilt's best outside shooter, Barry Goheen, hit a desperation three-pointer, the game went to overtime, Vanderbilt won, Kansas

won the national championship, Smith and Lane went pro and the Pitt program slid downhill for almost 15 years.

For a generation, there have been two things to say to stop any Pitt fan cold. The first is “48-14,” the score by which hated rival Penn State upset an undefeated and Number 1-ranked Pitt football team led by Dan Marino in 1981. The second is “Barry Goheen.” Both have been said to me many times.

By the fall of 1994, Paul Evans was gone, followed by Ralph Willard, a successful coach before he came to Pitt and after he left, but who did not succeed at Pitt. In 1999, Pitt tried again, this time with a little-known coach from Northern Arizona, Ben Howland.

In April 2008, after defeating Ben Howland’s UCLA team in the Final Four, Memphis was in the process of losing a nine-point lead in the last two minutes and twelve seconds against Kansas in the national championship game. Memphis still led by three in the final seconds, when a magnificent freshman guard named Derrick Rose, already perhaps the best player in the country, failed to foul a Kansas player. This allowed Kansas’s Mario Chalmers to hit a miracle three-pointer to force overtime, after which Kansas pulled away to win the championship, just as it had twenty years earlier. The Memphis coach was John Calipari. Within minutes, a friend emailed: “Somewhere in America tonight, Barry Goheen smiled and

Paul Evans allowed himself a wry chuckle.” Calipari did remember to take the blame, whether it was his or not.

As history was repeating itself for John Calipari and Kansas, I was putting the finishing touches on a book about a different era in Pitt basketball. An era that is continuing and one that we will look back on, unquestionably, as the Golden Era in Pitt Basketball. A time when Pitt played basketball the way it was meant to be played, not for a season or two, but for years and years.

I was ready to complete this book and send it out into the world. But not without hesitation. I am known as well past normal on the subject of Pitt basketball. This book would confirm that beyond doubt. I knew what I wanted to do, in truth what I had to do, but I needed a sign.

In my spare time I am a workaday lawyer and have been these past 28 years. The Sunday following the Memphis-Kansas national championship game in 2008 I went to the Pitt basketball banquet, a feel-good affair to celebrate the end of the college basketball season. Teams all over the country have them. When I got home, I checked my computer. A co-defendant had hired a prominent Atlanta law firm on a new case in which I had just gotten involved. There was an email from a partner at this firm, someone with whom I had never dealt before.

W E A L L W E G O T

It was from Barry Goheen.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST TIME



By December 19, 2001, its brief stab at college basketball glory a distant memory, Pitt had long since become an afterthought in the Big East Conference, with an unbroken string of forgettable basketball seasons:

1993-1994	13-14
1994-1995	10-18
1995-1996	10-17
1996-1997	18-15
1997-1998	11-16
1998-1999	14-16
1999-1000	13-15
2000-2001	19-14

To us, though, it was our team, and it always had been. Our three children were teenagers, the youngest, our son, born three months after the Pitt-Vanderbilt game of 1988. Since they were old enough to remember, they had never seen one really good Pitt basketball team. Not one. We always believed it was about to change.

The 2001-2002 season was supposed to be more of the same. The Big East coaches picked Pitt to finish sixth in what was then known, somewhat anomalously, as the West division of the Big East. Out of seven. Instead, Pitt finished ninth.

In the country.

Basketball as it was meant to be played. By *our* team.

Finally.

My 13-year-old son and I had suspected it when we headed up Cardiac Hill on the Pitt campus in November 2001 to see the annual Blue-Gold intra-squad scrimmage at the old Pitt Field House. The Field House was right next to where they were building the Petersen Center, or, as it became known, the Pete, the new arena for which Chancellor Mark Nordenberg and Athletic Director Steve Pederson had fought because they knew Pitt urgently needed it to have a chance to compete. On the surface, this Pitt team looked like Pitt teams had looked for a long time. A bunch of decent players. Just not the thoroughbreds the big teams had.

But this Pitt team had a leader at point guard, the most important position. Brandin Knight, the lightly-recruited younger brother of NBA player Brevin Knight, had been passed over by Seton Hall, his hometown school where his father had played and coached. From the day he got here, we knew that Brandin Knight was a basketball genius. I would tell my friend Jim, one of the few real basketball fans in Pittsburgh then: “I can’t explain to you how good this kid can be, what he can see on the court, the instincts, the sense of pace.” Brandin had a lot of growing up to do, physically, and,

by some accounts, in other ways. “At the beginning, Brandin did not always like to practice,” or words to that effect. The growing up had started to happen at the end of the previous year, when, after only six wins in the Big East tournament in 18 years, Brandin and the departed Ricky Greer led Pitt to the finals, something the Big East coaches had overlooked when they picked Pitt for the bottom of the league again that fall.

Brandin was a junior. Julius Page, a sophomore from Buffalo, returned at shooting guard after having started as a freshman. Julius had enjoyed his SportsCenter moment the previous winter when, at maybe 6-2, he dunked right in the face of 7-0 Ruben Boumtje Boumtje of Georgetown on a snowy night in January when Pitt had gone down to Georgetown and beaten a 16-0 Georgetown team—something else the experts had skipped past that fall. Julius played center in high school and his ball-handling and shooting were works in progress. But he was a great defender and he could jump so high and with such confidence that Brandin used to throw him lob passes, as Brandin once explained, just to shut him up.

There were two 6-7, 235-pound kids. Donatas Zavackas, a junior from Lithuania, was an interesting strain of European player. He had the usual things: smart, good shooter, a good floor game. But he also had a nasty streak. We called him Rocky V. Actually, he was nasty pretty much all the time, and he could defend the post, even though he couldn’t jump, not even a

little, and he couldn't run much either. Chevy Troutman, a redshirt freshman from Williamsport, PA could run, he could jump and he could rebound. Pitt recruited Chevy to play the small forward but he couldn't, at least not yet. At the start he couldn't shoot beyond two feet from the hoop. It took the coaches half the season to realize that he didn't need to.

A couple of roly-poly guys: Jaron Brown, a redshirt sophomore from Lexington, Kentucky; and Ontario Lett, who had been out of organized basketball. Of Lett, Ben Howland once said, "Sometimes you have to get lucky in this business." Pitt found Lett somewhere in Florida in the middle of the previous summer and offered him a scholarship on a playground after assistant coach Jamie Dixon noticed that his wingspan was 86 inches or something. Eight months later he was on the Big East All-Tournament team. Lett was listed at 6-6. I once heard Howland say that he was 6-4 and a half. Either way, Lett had a classic college post game: 270 pounds, easy, with great hands and feet. He played with a big smile on his face and it took about a half-hour to get around him.

Jaron. A lefty, like Julius. As unlikely-looking a basketball player as you will ever see. The year he sat out I swear he was 6-2, 250. As calm a soul as you would ever hope to see, too. Even now, when he's been gone four seasons, I watch the tapes and I am still learning about the things Jaron Brown could do on a basketball court. How he could guard four positions.

How he knew the game. How he made people better.

To this day, we have never replaced Jaron. Even more than Brandin. Because, at that scrimmage in 2001, Carl was there too, even though he was sitting out and it was the only time we would see him play that season. Carl Krauser, as he would let the world know, from the Bronx. Even if Carl Krauser never fully replaced Brandin Knight on the court or in our hearts, and even though my son and I fought about Carl for three years and whether it was OK that he wasn't Brandin, we still had Carl. But we have never replaced Jaron.

Chad Johnson, a transfer from Nebraska, was the only senior and the captain. 6-5 and lean, and a good defender, Johnson was the son of former NBA power forward Clemon Johnson. Sophomore Torrie Morris was a 6-11, 280 project from Tennessee who worked hard and got better, so much better that, after a college career as a part-time player, he was the last cut on an NBA team one season. Finally, a couple of redshirt freshmen: Mark McCarroll, 6-10, about 200, childhood friend in New York of rapper 50 Cent, and Yuri Demetris, a 6-3 guard, who despite his name was the only scholarship player on the whole team from Pittsburgh. Western Pennsylvania basketball had fallen far from the days of Maurice Stokes and Don Hennon and Norm Van Lier and Kenny Durrett and Maurice Lucas and Billy Knight and George Karl and Mickey and Brad Davis. And Ricky Coleman, who was the star of Lucas's high

school team, the legendary Schenley High team of 1971—a team that, when I was in ninth grade, came to our school and scored 151 points in a 32-minute game—and who, if he hadn't gotten hurt, might have been better than all of them.

So there it was, the 2001-02 Pitt Panthers. On the surface, just a bunch of modestly recruited players from all over the place. The kind of players who get you picked sixth in the West division of the Big East. The kind of players you find on a hundred teams.

Still, at the Blue-Gold scrimmage that night, we suspected that something was different. Ben Howland, hired by Steve Pederson and Chancellor Nordenberg in 1999, now had his system in place. His team had heeded his direction that they needed to get stronger if they wanted to compete in the Big East. They had a leader in Brandin Knight. They moved the ball. And they had something else, something that was so foreign to almost all of the Pitt teams I had watched for over 30 years, even the few good ones, that it took me a while to figure out that it was called defense.

Until December 19, 2001 we only suspected...

That night, Pitt traveled to Columbus to play an Ohio State team that ended up as co-champions of the Big Ten. It was not on television, so we all listened together in the den. Sometimes

you can tell what's happening in a basketball game better on the radio anyway. Pitt fell behind early, and caught up by halftime. I took a transistor radio and went for a walk. Pitt fell behind again, and then caught up again with about nine minutes to play. We had seen this movie many times. This is when an OK team playing a good team on the road decides that it has not embarrassed itself and that it is time to lose.

Except that this Pitt team didn't do that. Instead, this Pitt team kept fighting, one grinding, excruciating half-court possession at a time, and then it pulled away, 62-55. It's probably not the best thing for a 44-year-old man to pump his fist and scream out "YES!!" in the middle of a cold December night, like Dennis Hopper at the end of *Hoosiers*.

Because I knew.

When I got home, my family did too.

Anything you share with your family is a good thing. I have shared all of this with a very patient wife and our three wonderful children, two daughters and then a son. This helped to justify the time I had started to spend "talking" to other Pitt fans on the "Pantherlair" internet message board which we sometimes still call by (I think) the original name: The Pitt Sports Message Board, or just "the Board."

I chose “17-15” for my “name.” That was the score of the first Pitt football game I ever attended, against Notre Dame on November 7, 1964. I went with my father and grandfather. Notre Dame was Number 1 in the country; Pitt would finish 3-5-2. But Pitt fought Notre Dame all that day until they were stopped on a fourth and one in Notre Dame territory late in the game before losing, 17-15. I often have wondered whether there was something about that game at age seven, some cathexis, that made me a Pitt football and basketball fan for life—long after I had lost just about all interest in pro football and pro basketball and a lot of other things. So 17-15 it was, and I started to have conversations with the people my older daughter came to call my imaginary friends—DT and B Man and Midnight Blue and NTOP and Jeffburgh and many others, none of whom, to this day, I ever have spoken to or met.

On the Pitt board, there have been some fascinating people I never would have encountered, a lot of well-intentioned people, and a fair number of people whose mission in life is to find things to complain about and people to blame.

After the Ohio State game, I went online to announce to my new friends that things had changed and that, for the first time since the 1980s, the first time in my children’s memory, Pitt was really, really good. This time, they had built it the right way, with a foundation, and they were going to be really, really good for a long time.

DECEMBER 19, 2001:

PITT 62 @ OHIO STATE 55

The following post makes a point that sounds pretty bland in retrospect. It wasn't. It was a radical thought at the time. Take a look at what the records had been. In fact, this message still comes up once in a long while. Not by me, I might add.

22-7, At Least

Posted on 12/20/01

This team will struggle just to be an average shooting team and anything but a poor foul-shooting team. There is no “go-to” player. There is no true small forward.

So what.

This is a good basketball team. They are well coached. They have chemistry. They are athletic. They play defense. They are developing mental toughness. Except at point guard, they have enough depth. If Knight stays healthy, and the rest of the team reasonably healthy, I say 22-7 going into the Big East Tournament.

At least.

17-15

JANUARY 2, 2002	PITT 77 ST. JOHN'S 54
JANUARY 5, 2002	PITT 77 @ BOSTON COLLEGE 74
JANUARY 8, 2002	PITT 66 @ RUTGERS 58
JANUARY 12, 2002	NOTRE DAME 56 @ PITT 53
JANUARY 15, 2002	MIAMI 76 PITT 69 (2 OT)
JANUARY 19, 2002	PITT 68 @ GEORGETOWN 67
JANUARY 22, 2002	PITT 72 SYRACUSE 57
JANUARY 26, 2002	PITT 67 GEORGETOWN 56

After impressive wins over St. John's at home, at defending Big East champion Boston College and All-American Troy Bell (ending BC's 25-game home winning streak), and then at the RAC against Rutgers, Pitt hit its first real adversity of the season, with a last-minute loss at home to Notre Dame and a double overtime loss at Miami. But they came back to win at Georgetown in a heart-stopper on a put-back by Jaron Brown in a game that featured the surprise emergence from the bench of a very important player, Chevy Troutman. Pitt then came home to hammer Syracuse and beat a good Georgetown team a second time, this time with surprising ease. Picked for nearly last in the Big East, Pitt was 18-3 and looking at a chance to play two games in Pittsburgh in the NCAA Tournament.

Thoughts

Posted on 1/28/02

Unless you are Duke or a very few others, teams just don't go 21 games without really getting rocked once or twice, especially on the road. Maybe it will happen at just the worst time, like the 1971 Penn team that was 28-0 and then lost 90-47 in the regional finals to a Villanova team it already had beaten. It hasn't happened yet.

In the meantime, fate has conspired to create a delicious irony. Even two months ago I never would have imagined that I would be spending time worrying about whether Pitt could get to play in the NCAA Tournament in Pittsburgh. I thought it was a given that teams could not play in their home city. They probably shouldn't be able to. Now, at this very moment when Pitt is really good and the first round is in Pittsburgh, they change the rules to make it possible for the high seeds. When they made this change, Pitt had to be the last team they were thinking about.

17-15

JANUARY 30, 2002	NOTRE DAME 89 PITT 76
FEBRUARY 2, 2002	PITT 71 VILLANOVA 59
FEBRUARY 7, 2002	PITT 70 SETON HALL 65
FEBRUARY 10, 2002	PITT 75 @ SYRACUSE 63

Rocked, indeed. Pitt actually trailed Notre Dame by 28 at the half, and wins over Villanova and Seton Hall at home were only slightly more inspiring. Then, down 14 points with 13 and a half minutes to play, about the time the Pitt basketball season traditionally unraveled, our mucking and grinding half-court Panthers unexpectedly turned on the jets and ran Syracuse straight out of the Carrier Dome, led by soon-to-be All-American Brandin Knight.

Wow!

Posted on 2/11/02

Message boards reveal a lot of narcissism. Here it's all about Pitt. Go to the Syracuse board and the only talk is about Syracuse, and the only debate is whether their highly successful coach of 25 years should be fired or executed.

From the Pitt side, a Big East Player of the Year performance by Knight to pull himself off the deck when it counted after a rough first 25 minutes. Juice off the bench from Chad Johnson. Quiet strength from Jaron Brown. Brown is like a parent out there.

My dream is for Pitt to go back to the Carrier Dome this year. But not to play Syracuse. To the Eastern Regional. To play the best and see exactly how good this Pitt team is.

I want Duke.

FEBRUARY 16, 2002	PITT 85 @ WEST VIRGINIA 75
FEBRUARY 21, 2002	PITT 78 RUTGERS 59
FEBRUARY 26, 2002	PITT 73 @ SETON HALL 66 (OT)
MARCH 2, 2002	PITT 92 WEST VIRGINIA 65

Pitt continued its magical season, pounding West Virginia twice and Rutgers, and surviving a tough game at Seton Hall when Zavackas hit a three-pointer to force overtime—a result I got from our son when I called him from London in the middle of the night. That made seven straight wins going into the Big East Tournament and a tie with UConn for the regular season championship at 13-3, Pitt’s first since the 1988 team led by Charles Smith and Jerome Lane. The second West Virginia game was the last game ever played at the Fitzgerald Field House, a beat-up old armory where I had been watching basketball since I was nine years old.

The Field House

Posted on 3/4/02

25 and 4. *25 and freakin’ 4.* At a time when the children all were home and really into it. We always will remember this season, no matter what happens from this point.

I’ve been coming to the Field House since my dad took me to the high school doubleheaders in 1966. Some favorites:

- Bo Ellis and the Marquette uniforms he supposedly designed.
- Bruce Atkins coming out with a shaved head when Pitt Duquesne mattered.

- Darryl Gissendanner blocking Greg Jones's shot against West Virginia and breaking into the Ali Shuffle.
- Sweet George Allen and his ahead-of-his-time long shorts.
- The night the TV crawl read "Matt Miklasevich leads the Big East in sacks."
- Tiger Paul.
- Beating Georgetown with Patrick Ewing and St. John's with Chris Mullin in Pitt's first year in the Big East.
- Charles Smith's first tip-in, above the square, in the first minute of his first game.
- Jerome Lane. The piece of glass that still hangs in my office.
- My friend's 12-year-old son jumping out of his courtside seat to give Brandin Knight a low five after Brandin threw a perfect pass on the break for a dunk.

On Saturday night, before the ceremony introducing five decades of Pitt basketball players, my son's baseball coach at the Boy's Club, Ken Wagoner, defensive ace on Pitt's 1974 Final Eight team, brought over the great All-American from that team, Billy Knight, so my son could meet him.

The Field House is closed. But the circle is unbroken.

17-15

T H E F I R S T T I M E

MARCH 7, 2002	PITT 76 BOSTON COLLEGE 62 [BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 8, 2002	PITT 76 MIAMI 71 [BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 9, 2002	UCONN 74 PITT 65 (2 OT) [BIG EAST FINALS]
MARCH 15, 2002	PITT 71 CENTRAL CONN. ST. 54 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 17, 2002	PITT 63 CALIFORNIA 50 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 21, 2002	KENT STATE 78 PITT 73 (OT) [NCAA SWEET 16]

2001-2002 RECORD: 29-6

After the last game at the Field House, Pitt went on a stirring run through the Big East Tournament, only to lose a classic double overtime final to a UConn team led by future NBA stars Caron Butler, Emeka Okafor and Ben Gordon. Ontario Lett was brilliant, scoring 17 points and repeatedly challenging the great shot-blocker, Okafor. Brandin Knight was carried off with a knee injury at the end of regulation. After two heroic three-pointers by Zavackas brought them back in overtime, Knight returned, Willis Reed style, to hit the rim on a half court shot that would have won the game. In the second overtime, with UConn up two, a minute to play and Knight out

for good, Taliek Brown hit a 30-foot prayer with one second on the shot clock to break open the game for UConn.

Although those two shots are shown from time to time on ESPN and Classic Sports, my posts from the Big East Tournament, like the broadcasts of the last three minutes of the 1974 N.C. State-Maryland game and the seventh game of the 1960 World Series, appear lost to history. So are the posts about Pitt's two NCAA wins in Pittsburgh, after all, and then their overtime loss in Lexington to a Kent State team led by future NFL All-Pro tight end Antonio Gates right after Duke had lost in shocking fashion to Indiana. We were at all of those games, and while the posts were written on lap-tops, they were not saved, except for the one about the obscenely drunken UConn fan at Madison Square Garden in a Caron Butler jersey, "Mullet Man," who added a really bad memory to that classic game.

As I remember these lost posts, they were devoted to many of the themes that I felt—and still feel—about that season: that it was Pitt's time, which, as I look back on it, it was, even if they came up short in the Big East and the NCAAs; that Brandin Knight was a basketball genius; and that I wanted desperately to see a Pitt team with no future pros take on a Duke team that had six. I still choose to believe that if Duke had beaten Indiana that night in Lexington, Pitt would have found a way to beat Kent State. Then we would have seen.

THE FIRST TIME

It has been a wonderful seven years but there is nothing like the first time, especially when it comes out of nowhere and your children are all still home to enjoy it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MOST SPECIAL TEAM



DECEMBER 18, 2002:	PITT 69 OHIO STATE 49
DECEMBER 31, 2002:	GEORGIA 79 PITT 67
JANUARY 6, 2003:	PITT 72 NOTRE DAME 55
JANUARY 12, 2003:	PITT 70 @ RUTGERS 63
JANUARY 14, 2003:	PITT 80 @ WEST VIRGINIA 61

With everyone back except Chad Johnson, and a terrific young player in Carl Krauser to replace him, Pitt was a Top 5 team from the start of the 2002-2003 season. After missing a chance on New Year's Eve in Georgia to be Number 1 in the country, Pitt bounced back to beat Notre Dame and went on a nice run, including a third straight double-figure win over Syracuse, a team which, by the way, won the national championship that season—a subject discussed in great detail much later in a way that does not reveal my best qualities. In fact, this message gets the ball rolling a bit. 2002 also was the year our older daughter went off to college. I missed her and perhaps this carried over into some of my posts, including this one.

But anyone who really watched this Pitt team will understand the last part of this post.

1964

Posted on 1/20/03

Team basketball vs. individual basketball. The second half was the best all-around passing that I can ever remember seeing by a Pitt team, and it involved every player.

Boeheim's comparison of Pitt's defense with the old Georgetown teams was calculated and unfair. Pitt's defense has absolutely nothing to do with the old Georgetown defense. Pitt's defense is predicated on position, balance and help. Georgetown's defense was based on pressure, speed, shot blocking and hacking, and on intimidation of players and referees. Pitt's defense is far too sound to let Boeheim give it an unfair reputation.

All that's for another day. This is the team I've been waiting for all my life. Before the 1964 NCAA finals, a journalist asked a visiting Russian coach who would win between UCLA, with no starter over 6-5, and Duke, with its huge front line. The Russian coach said UCLA. The journalist asked him how he could pick against all that size. The Russian coach said: "Yes, but UCLA is team."

Pitt is team.

17-15

JANUARY 25, 2003

PITT 65 GEORGETOWN 64

FEBRUARY 1, 2003

SYRACUSE 67 PITT 65

After surviving a surprisingly tough home game with Georgetown, Pitt traveled to Syracuse limping a bit but with its second chance at the Number 1 ranking. After off-season surgery for his Big East Finals injury, Brandin Knight was playing on a bad knee, as he did all that season, and Julius Page had injured his ankle.

This one hurt. Pitt broke out to a big lead led by Chevy Troutman and forced Syracuse out of its traditional 2-3 zone. Syracuse got back in the game with a man-to-man defense that was surprisingly effective, probably even to Syracuse. After Syracuse hit two foul shots with three seconds left to go up by two, Brandin hit a half court shot a tenth of a second after the buzzer that would have won the game. In the ensuing confusion as the referees looked at the replay, Syracuse fans stormed the court three different times.

Injuries and a Philosophical Disagreement

Posted on 2/2/03

First, some due credit to Syracuse. Warrick and Duany, embarrassed in the first game, came to play last night. McNeil showed a lot of guts on those foul shots at the end. Their defense was good in the second half.

Enough about Syracuse. I have felt for two months that the biggest issue on this Pitt team is health. It will be painful if

Pitt loses in the NCAAs. But it will be much worse if we never get to see how good this team can be.

Philosophical disagreement with B Man. I don't like being homered but it happens and I can live with it. That's not to say that Syracuse did not deserve to win last night. But I do not and will not accept that it's OK for coaches, and teams, and schools to work the refs and the league. I am well aware that it will never stop. That does not make it OK. It's wrong. And it's even worse when it is premeditated and not in the heat of the game.

[And on and on I went, harkening back to Boeheim's comments in Pittsburgh...as I say, some people never grow up.]

17-15

THE MOST SPECIAL TEAM

FEBRUARY 4, 2003	PITT 68 PROVIDENCE 61
FEBRUARY 9, 2003	NOTRE DAME 66 PITT 64
FEBRUARY 12, 2003	PITT 82 WEST VIRGINIA 46
FEBRUARY 15, 2003	SETON HALL 73 PITT 61
FEBRUARY 18, 2003	PITT 82 @ GEORGETOWN 67

Battling lingering injuries and the grinding portion of a long college basketball season, Pitt struggled for the first half of February. They bottomed out in a desultory performance against Seton Hall, a game in which it was clear two minutes in that they were not ready to play. But Pitt pushed off the bottom of the pool at Georgetown and they did not lose again for a long, long time.

I remember the Georgetown game for two other things. One was Pitt broadcaster Dick Groat, the college basketball player of the year in 1952 (and the MVP of the National League in baseball in 1960) reminiscing about his freshman basketball coach at Duke 55 years earlier, with whom he had visited that night. Red Auerbach. The other was the gracious and heartfelt comments by Ben Howland, who takes some hits later in this book, about what a great competitor Michael Sweetney of Georgetown was and how he made a point to find him and tell him that after the game.

The Crossroads

Posted on 2/18/03

The probing, piercing, razor-sharp analysis will have to wait. This is a night for broad, sweeping, chest-thumping pronouncements based upon what, on the surface, is the scantest of evidence:

Just one game. Against a struggling team. But if you believe, as I do, that this was the crossroads game for this team and that Brandin Knight and Pitt are finally getting healthy, you could conclude, as I do, that this team might not lose again for a long, long, long time.

17-15

FEBRUARY 22, 2003

PITT 86 RUTGERS 65

FEBRUARY 26, 2003

PITT 75 @ VIRGINIA TECH 62

*I get carried away in March.***March**

Posted on 3/1/03

A college basketball season builds slowly. They win. Sometimes they lose. The games start to get tougher. Problems are solved. Or they aren't. Players emerge. Others fade.

In March it gets very emotional, very quickly, and it is on us now.

In five days, Brandin Knight, Donatas Zavackas and Ontario Lett never will play another game for Pitt in Pittsburgh.

The Big East Tournament. Then the NCAA, or to use Ben Howland's fitting throwback term, the N-C-Two-A. Before Pitt showed us the drama of the Big East Tournament, before there even was a Big East Tournament, there was the N-C-Two-A. I have watched it unfold for nearly 40 years.

In the late 1970s, long before the NCAA office pools that now are ubiquitous, a friend introduced me to a "player pool" where a group of us would draft players on the tournament teams, rather than pick teams, and follow their scoring through the tournament. For 25 years, with friends from around the country, the "pool" has been the way we have celebrated the NCAA Tournament. No money. Just glory. And a trophy.

March From A to Z:

- A. Dave Bing, Vaughn Harper and Richie Cornwall for Syracuse against Duke in 1966.
- B. Listening to Kentucky (Louie Dampier, Pat Riley, Larry Conley, Tommy Kron and Thad Jaracz) all that year on a Kentucky radio station you could pick up in Pittsburgh at night, all the way to the historic national championship game against Texas Western.
- C. Kentucky center Dan Issel, another radio favorite, fouling out on an away-from-the-ball charging foul against 5-10 Vaughn Wedeking and Jacksonville in the 1970 Mideast Regional Finals.
- D. Austin Carr and the day he put up 61 points against Ohio U, in the first game on the first Saturday afternoon on NBC.
- E. Pembroke Burrows III.
- F. Bill Walton against Memphis State in 1973. 21 for 22. As otherworldly as Walton was on Monday night, Ernie D. was just as good on Saturday afternoon.
- G. “The Great David Thompson” as he was always known in the kids’ bedtime stories.
- H. Rooting for Duke and Spanarkel, Gminski, and Banks in

1978. We ran into Gminski in a bar in Pittsburgh in the early 1980s. He was in for a wedding. Nice guy. A friend took the opportunity to introduce himself: “Hi, I’m Chip. I went to Carolina. I hated you.”

- I. Driving to a high elevation in 1979 to pull in the first NCAA scores from KYW in Philly and realizing that we were going to be doing this pool for a long time.
- J. In school in Ann Arbor, watching Magic Johnson and Michigan State all that year on Channel 6 from Lansing on an old black and white TV. Then watching them blow away Notre Dame right after St. Patrick’s Day, a game that started and pretty much ended with a tic-tac-toe play on the opening tip.
- K. The greatest ten seconds in basketball history: Arkansas over Louisville on a half-court shot by U.S. Reed, cutting instantly to Rolando Blackman of Kansas State in the deep right corner taking down Number 1-seed Oregon State and Steve Johnson (“the Big Moose with the Big Caboose”), all narrated flawlessly by Bryant Gumbel from the NBC studio.
- L. Watching with a bunch of law school buddies who had gone to Notre Dame as Danny Ainge of BYU went through the whole Notre Dame team.

- M. For Georgetown in 1982 and never again until Big John left.
- N. A friend's graceful exit from pool contention; first Saturday every year: "Shabbat Shalom."
- O. Deciding, with a friend, that the day that Bobby Knight and Digger Phelps are out of the NCAA Tournament is the first day of spring.
- P. Getting off a plane in 1986 to hear that Indiana and Notre Dame had lost in the first round to Cleveland State and Arkansas-Little Rock.
- Q. A friend's lament on having to miss the pool: "I can't believe it. There are only like four things a year I look forward to, and two of them happen in my bedroom."
- R. Curry Kirkpatrick's articles.
- S. Carrying my three-year-old daughter in the ocean in Florida in 1987, both of us singing "Walk Like a Tarkanian." Then, startling my infant younger daughter after Chris Blocker's long jumper sent UTEP into overtime against Arizona in Tucson.
- T. The curse of Barry Goheen.
- U. A friend's job interview: "I'm a hard worker. But I'll need four days off in March, and I'm going to need

them for the rest of my life.”

- V. Bo Kimble’s left-handed foul shot for Hank Gathers in 1990, a shot that held a special meaning to my sister and me.
- W. Watching that year as the first great UConn team beat Clemson at the buzzer on Scott Burrell’s miracle pass and Tate George’s miracle shot. Not being able to move a muscle because my infant son was asleep on my lap.
- X. Buying a Stanley Cup style trophy for our pool and including first, second and third places because I had won twice but finished third eight times. To which another friend, then a six-time winner, replied: “I agree. It’s important. I wonder who finished third in World War II?”
- Y. Coppin State.
- Z. Vowing that I never would have a partner in the pool, taking on the only one I ever could—my son—and together, winning for my third time ever, 1982, 1992 and 2002, or as my friend says: “Almost as often as by random chance.”

It’s March. It’s time.

17-15

MARCH 2, 2003

PITT 71 UCONN 67

Pitt-UConn. Again.

U-C-O-N-N UCONN!! UCONN!! UCONN!!

Posted on 3/3/03

UConn is my favorite team for Pitt to play, as long as they don't do it very often. The three most intense games I've seen Pitt play in the past five years were against UConn: the crushing loss in 1999 that launched UConn on a path to the national championship, the Big East Finals last year and yesterday. It seems like the same game to me, and it is exhausting just to watch.

There have been other good teams lately in the Big East. But nobody brings it in the Big East these days like UConn. Unless it's Pitt.

Yesterday was a test of talent and a test of wills. UConn may not have played their best, but I'm pretty sure they played their hardest. It seems like they never quit, at least when they play Pitt. At the point in the game when most teams give up and mail it in, UConn didn't. Instead they came roaring back and almost stole it like they did in 1999. They reflect the fighting spirit of their coach, and I mean that in the best sense.

17-15

MARCH 5, 2003	PITT 86 SETON HALL 54
MARCH 9, 2003	PITT 56 @ VILLANOVA 54
MARCH 13, 2003	PITT 67 PROVIDENCE 59
	[BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]

After blowing out Seton Hall on an emotional Senior Night for Brandin, Donatas and Ontario, Pitt almost lost a ten-point lead in the last minute against a Villanova team depleted by “phone card” suspensions. Pitt had not lost since the “crossroads” game at Georgetown and went into the Big East Tournament as regular season champion at 13-3 and the Number 1 seed.

The Providence game was stressful, though, and much closer than the final score, largely thanks to the superb Ryan Gomes and excellent play by freshman point guard Donnie McGrath. Chevy Troutman was hurt but Donatas Zavackas hit several crucial shots, after each of which my son and I jumped up, made the sign for a three-pointer, and, in our best Lithuanian accents, shouted the first two words we ever heard Zavackas say, the second of which was “you.”

The First Day of Basketball Season

Posted on 3/13/03

Neutral court, single elimination college basketball. Joy of my life. Once again, I am laughed out of the family room when I suggest, as I do every year, that it is all a metaphor for death.

It's been a heck of a day of basketball. Let's start with the Pitt game, of course:

My satisfaction with Pitt winning a tough, gritty game is tempered by the nagging feeling that has bothered me all year: Is this team ever going to be healthy enough to show what it can do?

Pitt is like a finely-tuned watch. When all of the parts are working it is a beautiful thing. But they need every part. Time after time with Chevy out, Pitt worked the ball until it reached a player who just isn't quite as good, no matter how hard he tries, and everything just stopped.

If Chevy is reasonably OK, I pick Pitt over BC. I think UConn will beat Syracuse.

I like Pitt's chances better against Syracuse. Beating UConn would be more satisfying.

17-15

MARCH 14, 2003

PITT 61 BOSTON COLLEGE 48

[BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]

Of course Brandin sprained his ankle, to go with Chevy's. Nevertheless, Pitt put BC away early, setting up the rematch of the epic 2002 Big East Final with UConn, who, in the second game, slaughtered soon-to-be national champion Syracuse.

Again

Posted on 3/15/03

The two elite teams in the Big East meet in the final of the Big East Tournament. A rematch of the best college basketball game of 2002.

A little while ago, Brandin said on Channel 2: "I'll be in the line-up tomorrow. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

I am rapidly coming to the view that I like Championship Week as much or more than the NCAA Tournament. Even though I loved the basketball part of going to the Big East last year and I'm sure I will go again some time, I think I'm enjoying the games all over the dial more this year.

But I will be sorry not to be there tomorrow when Pitt finally wins the Big East Tournament.

UConn is very, very good. It is tough to beat a good team twice in two weeks. UConn is much healthier than Pitt.

UConn matches up very well with Pitt on the perimeter and it has the equalizer inside in Okafor.

So why will Pitt win?

Because they will. Because I choose to believe they will.
Because they have to. Because *they* think they have to.

Because they have unfinished business.

17-15

MARCH 15, 2003

PITT 74 UCONN 56 [BIG EAST FINALS]

“We have just been informed that Julius Page is the Big East Championship Most Valuable Player. And again typical of Pittsburgh, Len, it could have been Knight, it could have been Zavackas, it could have been Brown, it could have been Troutman, it could have been Lett.”

—Dan Shulman, ESPN.

And when Brandin Knight exploded across the TV screen to steal a ball that UConn had rolled in to save time, a startling play I have never seen before or since, one that meant nothing to the outcome except for the focus, intensity and intelligence it reflected, it captured every emotion I felt and still feel about that team.

**Every Once in a While,
Life Can Be Almost Perfect**

Posted on 3/16/03

It is a privilege to watch them play basketball.

And a little bit humbling.

I don't know these kids or these coaches. I'm sure they have their flaws and I know they will have their ups and downs in life. But they will always know that there was at least one time in their life when they were at their best, and not just as athletes.

I watched the game with my parents, my wife and our son. Three generations, ages 14 to 78, but all feeling exactly the same way

about this team. My mother asked what that was when Brandin dove for that rolling ball. I told her that it was a triumph of the human spirit.

It is hard to keep that spirit together. Pitt has had it for more than two years. Winning helps. I am sure that Brandin Knight is central to what's going on out there. I'm equally sure that Pitt will play like this as long as Ben Howland is the coach. If he should ever leave, I would do what I often think is a bad idea, and hire an untested assistant, Jamie Dixon, just in the hope that Pitt would continue to play basketball like this.

I also wanted to say a word about Ricky Greer. He was a big part of building this. Chad Johnson, too. This did not happen overnight.

For months, it seemed that Pitt would never get healthy enough to show the country what kind of team they have. They showed them tonight. With nagging injuries all year, this team is 26 and 4 in one of the top conferences in the country. Pitt is not hot. Pitt is good.

Pitt would have beaten any team in the country tonight.

Calhoun was gracious and insightful after the game. I particularly liked that he said that he cared very much about this game. He did not try and pull a Lute Olson or, so I hear,

Roy Williams, and explain that conference tournament games don't matter. Or maybe Ben should call the selection committee and explain that the loss at Seton Hall really was not important for Pitt, even if you and I know it was the crossroads. Which leads, naturally, to...

Seeding. Pitt is not the fourth Number 1 seed. Pitt is the third team in this tournament behind Kentucky and Arizona, in that order. In fact, Pitt's accomplishments stack up quite nicely against Arizona's, and Pitt's playing better.

Pitt deserves the Number 1 seed in the East. Frankly, there is not a serious debate. If Pitt is a Number 2 seed in the East behind Kansas or Texas it would be wrong but I can live with that, because I think Pitt is better. But if Pitt is moved out of the East, especially if it put in the same region as Kentucky or Arizona, it will be grossly unfair.

It might end up being unfair to Kentucky or Arizona.

17-15

MARCH 21, 2003	PITT 87 WAGNER 61 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 23, 2003	PITT 74 INDIANA 52 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]

Ranked fourth in the country, Pitt was shipped out of the East to Minneapolis via Boston. As a Number 2 seed. Where Marquette and the University of Wisconsin were waiting from the state next door—not to mention Kentucky, the top-ranked team in the country. While Syracuse, the third place team in the Big East, got to play in Albany as a Number 3 seed in a weak regional after a blowout loss to the UConn team Pitt beat the next night by 18. Not that I'm bitter. But for a while it looked like it wouldn't matter.

Halfway Between Boston and Minneapolis

Posted on 3/25/03

That's where Pitt is. That's where we are.

It is such a pleasure to watch this team come to full flower. Some observations from the best weekend of the year for basketball fans, starting, of course, with your Pitt Panthers:

Pitt was 15-20 points better than the other seven teams in Boston, including Syracuse.

Pitt is at the top of their game defensively. On offense, they can play much better.

Finally, Pitt is almost healthy. Brandin is starting to cut like he

can. Julius is almost jumping like he can. Chevy is almost running the court like he can.

I propose that people stop calling Jaron Brown “the glue.” That is a term typically used to describe a player who does all of the little things but can’t do the big things. It usually is reserved for a step slow white guy and, then, typically accompanied by implicitly racist terms such as “heady,” “steady” and “gutty.” I prefer Jaron’s own description in last week’s paper: “I feel like I’m just as good as anybody on our team.”

My favorite moment in Boston: sitting with my Boston cousin, who once told me she went on a double date that included Ernie Davis when she was a student at Syracuse over 40 years ago, but who probably has been to four college sporting events in her life, three of which were Pitt games with me. “What did you think of that woman behind us giving a running commentary the whole game?” “That’s OK. That was Brandin Knight’s mother.” Believe me; the apple did not fall far from the tree.

My second favorite moment: Brandin’s crosscourt bullet pass intended for Jaron that hit Chevy square in the gut and Chevy laid it in without even blinking. (Digression: sitting courtside, we have come to learn that these guys—and not just Pitt guys—are so tough it’s ridiculous. But are they tougher than hockey players? As my son and I joke: “Kasparaitis re-attaches his head and skates up ice.”)

And from 11 hours in front of the TV on Saturday at my sister's house:

Arizona is whistling past the graveyard. First, they didn't care if they won their conference tournament. Now, Luke Walton says Gonzaga is as good as any team he's played in five years. Really? As good as Duke in the national championship game with Jason Williams, Shane Battier, Carlos Boozer and Mike Dunleavy? I have another theory. Arizona is not that good.

Far be it from me to question Lute Olson. He's won a national championship and I'm here posting on this message board. But as Arizona's star freshman, McDonald's All-American Hassan Adams, played 4 minutes out of 50 on Saturday, Ben Howland was taking another step in the masterful, season-long process of integrating his freshman, Carl Krauser, into the rotation.

Any one of the four teams could win that over-hyped region. I guess somebody has to win the East. The South is not a bad regional if they took it out of the state of Texas, where UConn would have every chance to win it.

So I agree with DT who agreed with me. I'm more upset—not less—about this bracket after last weekend. Marquette is a good team deserving of its seed. Maybe they will beat Pitt in front of a home crowd. I don't think so. I think Pitt and Kentucky are the two best teams in the country.

To those of you in a love-fest with Syracuse, let me suggest that

you might be singing a different tune next week when a patently inferior Syracuse team gets Pitt's slot in the Final Four because they got Pitt's rightful slot in the East Region. I have no problem with Syracuse. I rooted for them up in Boston on Sunday. But it was wrong on Selection Sunday and it's still wrong.

17-15

MARCH 27, 2003

MARQUETTE 77 PITT 74 [NCAA SWEET 16]

2002-2003 RECORD: 28-5

Lots of time to heal, to reflect, to reconsider. Not yet.

A Sacred Trust

Posted on 3/31/03

I'm getting a little less resistance at home to the metaphor for death thing. It is the last moment of childhood for these players and that is not a metaphor.

Partly for that reason, I won't jump all over Donatas Zavackas, as surreal as that was. *[In the middle of the second half, Donatas took his shoes off and sat on the floor in the corner by the end line. I still wonder what he was thinking.]* Contrary to what I heard many other Pitt fans say, he has to answer to himself, his family and his team, and not to a bunch of people he does not know and who do not pay him. He's also a young man. He's going to have a hard enough time dealing with this, especially over time, and to live with that cloud over what was a good, hard-earned college career.

It probably would have happened eventually. Every team loses but one. Marquette was the better team on Thursday night and they may well have beaten Pitt on a lot of nights. Dwyane Wade is a great player. I think they will lose to Kansas, but

Marquette is a very deserving Final Four team and an inspiration to medium-budget schools everywhere.

There also was much to be proud of on Thursday night, especially the unconquerable fighting spirit of Brandin Knight and, really, everyone out there, as Pitt fought back through many different kinds of adversity at the end of that game and almost made it all the way back. One lasting image I have is of Carl Krauser, alone, exhorting the crowd to make noise on Travis Diener's two missed foul shots down three with two and a half seconds to play. If life really was perfect, Carl's indomitable will would have been rewarded and he would have made that three-quarter court shot Barry Goheen style.

This team and this season, really the last two seasons, have been a treasure. One that will last with me forever and will be an important part of the time we have spent together as a family.

But I am miserable.

Because this team, the team I have been waiting for all my life, was not together at the end. That was not Pitt basketball Thursday night, win or lose. Midway through the first half, I found myself explaining to my guests from Minneapolis who joined us at the game that the team I had been telling them about was not the team they were seeing.

Maybe it was just one of those nights, when the help defense was just a half-step late and the communication just wasn't quite right. Maybe Marquette is even better than I appreciate. But maybe it was something else.

If the news reports of his courtship of UCLA are accurate, and to my knowledge he has not denied them, I think Ben Howland breached a sacred trust with his team last week. The reason that this team was so special was that Ben Howland and his staff persuaded a bunch of young men from diverse and often difficult backgrounds, young men with whose care he had been entrusted, that the good of the group was more important than the interest of any individual. Then, at the crucial moment, Ben put his own interest ahead of his team's.

It's not the leaving. That happens. Ben Howland owed it to his team not to create a distraction at the summit of all they had worked for over many years. If he wanted to pursue this, he could have contacted UCLA and said that he would talk to them. After the season and on one condition: that he had a team to coach that demanded and deserved his full attention, and that any breach of that confidence would terminate his interest. Better still, he could have waited until after the season.

Did Ben Howland's sideshow affect the team? I'm not sure that ever can be fully known, certainly not by me. I'm not an "inside information" guy, and I don't want to be. Maybe I'm

all wet. Surely, I am naïve. But I will always wonder. I will always wonder if Pitt could have been the team that cheated death and won the whole thing.

17-15

There was debate on the Board for a long time after this game, good debate, especially with the insightful B Man, over whether Marquette and Dwyane Wade were just too good for Pitt. Now that Wade has confirmed his greatness in the NBA, that likely will be the view of history. I never will be persuaded of that, especially the way that Pitt was out of synch in the extended time that Wade was out of the game. And Marquette did lose by thirty-three to Kansas in the Final Four. While this debate was going on, Ben Howland left and “we” had another decision to make.

The Case for Jamie Dixon

Posted on 4/1/03

The guy I really want would be sweet payback to UCLA. Unfortunately, he’s 92 years old.

Failing that, I’m for Jamie Dixon...

17-15

As I look back on these last few messages I wish I was a better person and that I did not take all this so seriously. But I'm not, and I do, and this story would not be honest or complete without them.

The End

Posted on 4/8/03

Sadly, the 2002-2003 college basketball season is over. I hope and expect that over time, the lasting memories for me and my family will be of watching a team play the greatest game in the world the way it was meant to be played. Whatever else I feel about Ben Howland, I thank him for that. And if the goal is to leave a job better than you found it, it is hard to imagine anyone beating that standard by a larger margin than Ben Howland. Ben Howland was a truly inspired hire, one who turned around a program many thought could not be turned around, and who left Pitt with a very bright future. He also left Pitt with Jamie Dixon, who is central to that future.

It was thrilling to watch Pitt win the Big East Tournament. I disagree with the people who downplay the conference tournaments—at least that one. The Big East Tournament is a big deal to every team in the league. It always has been. I am quite sure that we still will watch the tape of that game 30 years from now. We will watch last year's Big East Final too. It's not only about winning.

It also was satisfying to confirm that Pitt was playing college basketball at the highest level this year. With the possible exception of Kansas in the national semi-finals, I did not see

any team in the NCAA Tournament that could have beaten the Pitt team that beat UConn in the Big East Finals. As we suspected, the Big East was very, very good this year. In fact, if UConn had not been forced to play Texas in Texas, and Pitt had held it together, the Big East might have had three teams in the Final Four. And, with all due respect, Syracuse would have finished third again.

Credit Syracuse. They were given an opportunity that Pitt had earned and that was deeply wrong, but they ran with it. So as to not be completely ungracious, I thought the Syracuse freshmen were spectacular, especially Carmelo Anthony, who played not just with great ability but with a control and maturity that were way beyond his years. Gerry McNamara was great, too, but in the end it was Anthony who wanted the ball. He rightly will be remembered as one of the all-time great Final Four players.

Still, it's going to take time. The last two weeks have been so disheartening. I don't know what bothers me more: watching Syracuse win the tournament with Pitt's draw or watching Ben Howland undo, so quickly, so much of what he and many others had painstakingly built over the last four years that, to most people, Pitt will be remembered, if at all, as a footnote to the 2002-2003 college basketball season.

This was a great and beautiful basketball team and it deserved a lot more than that.

All of this can be hard to explain to a 14-year-old boy, especially when you take it too seriously, as we do. I told him the following right after the final game, and I paraphrase:

“If you are going to love college sports, you need to understand that it is an inherently flawed system, that it is not going to change, and that what you are seeing is not an exception or an aberration. Instead, if you love college sports you are going to see some of the best aspects of life and some of the worst and often you are going to see them at the same time. The best things almost always are going to involve the kids and the worst things almost always are going to involve the adults.”

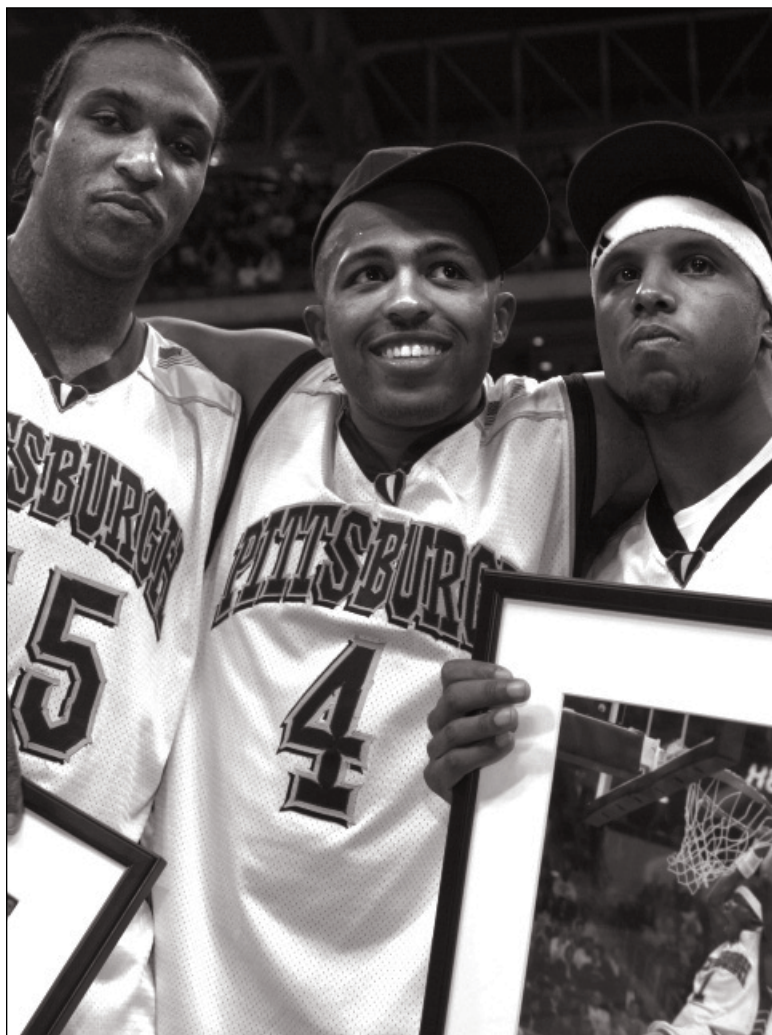
In my more honest moments, I confess that this drama, including the unfairness and the window into the dark side of human nature, is part of the attraction for me.

Finally, thanks to everyone here for all of your thoughts and for listening to mine. I have really enjoyed it. Next season is a new journey. I will not forget this one.

Regards.

17-15

CHAPTER THREE
31 AND
FREAKIN' 5



Hope springs eternal. This was a response to “Midnight Blue” the night I first saw Aaron Gray play, at an all-star game at the Pete. Aaron Gray was not heavily recruited. He barely played his first two years at Pitt. But you could see it, and my son and I both saw it that night.

Hello MNB

Posted on 4/15/03

Long time, no talk.

I think Aaron Gray will play in the NBA someday.

17-15

NOVEMBER 14, 2003

PITT 71 ALABAMA 62

[MADISON SQUARE GARDEN]

There are a number of people who carry the Board all year long. I am not one of them. It takes me a while to get into it. So I get called out every once in a while, including after Pitt easily handled an Alabama team that ended up going to the Elite Eight in 2004.

Re: 17-15 where are you?

Posted on 11/24/03

I am not really locked into basketball yet, although I finally did bear to watch the tape of the Marquette game last night. Not a bad place to start in forming early thoughts on this year's team. My short answers are these:

I am not capable of describing how spectacular Brandin Knight was at the end of that game.

Sadly, Brandin is gone. Carl cannot control tempo like Brandin or defend as well as Brandin but he brings one or two things that Brandin did not. Overall, the task as I see it is to let Carl help shape the identity of this team without running amuck. I would say, so far so good, even if I suspect that some of the older players are adjusting to this too.

Regards.

17-15

DECEMBER 30, 2003

PITT 76 GEORGIA 55

Mark McCarroll, 26 points. Everyone should have at least one game to remember, even if it was in the synagogue league in 1973.

One Step at a Time

Posted on 12/31/03

It was Mark McCarroll's night. That gorgeous UCLA bank shot? Was that David Meyers? Marques Johnson? Edgar Lacey?

My only problem with Mark shows how far he's come. Two years ago, my wife promised one of our friends' kids that she would buy him a box of popcorn if Mark ever scored 10 points in a game. For two full seasons, it was a safe bet. Now it's popcorn almost every night, a hotdog here and there, and last night a demand for a steak dinner.

An aside: McCarroll was asked on the post-game show whether Chevy was the strongest player he's played against. Without hesitation, Mark said, no, it was Ron Artest...

17-15

In the preseason, Pitt was ranked around Number 22. It was becoming clear that they were even better than that, again. Along with the proven nucleus of Jaron, Julius and Chevy, Carl was starting to take control at the point. Pitt also was getting a huge lift from 6-9 freshman center Chris Taft from Brooklyn, Pitt's most highly-recruited player in years, who was playing even better than expected. Mark McCarroll was helping too, as were three other freshmen who would become much more prominent down the road: 6-3 guard Antonio Graves from Mansfield, Ohio, and two big white kids: massive 7-0 Aaron Gray from across the state in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, who came in at 300 pounds and eventually got down to 270; and a 6-9 free spirited, cliff-diving redshirt freshman from Vancouver, Levon Kendall, named for Levon Helm of The Band.

"Pre-Season" Summary

Posted on 1/4/04

They have played 14 games. It seems like a good time to take stock. Here's one important thing:

Pitt is 14-0.

Pitt has beaten teams who have beaten other good teams. Georgia beat Georgia Tech the same week Pitt beat Georgia by 21 without Krauser. Florida State beat Maryland right after Pitt beat Florida State. Alabama beat Oregon and Wisconsin.

Here's another important thing:

Jamie Dixon looks comfortable in this job.

Pitt has five who look like they can compete with just about any five in the country. Carl has taken the reins from Brandin pretty darn well, even if there is still some work to do, and probably a couple of bumps in the road, before everyone plays beautiful music together. Julius and Carl are volatile, emotional players with strong personalities. Taft may be one too, although it is hard to tell whether it's him or his game that's so explosive.

But Jaron and Chevy are like rocks.

14-0. As Louie Carnesecca used to say: It's cold. It's dark. It's time for the Big East.

17-15

JANUARY 6, 2004

PITT 78 VIRGINIA TECH 59

JANUARY 10, 2004

PITT 84 @ MIAMI 80 (2OT)

Pitt was 16-0 and Carl Krauser was continuing to settle in at point guard. He saved the Miami game with a coast-to-coast dash to send it into overtime. A couple of years ago, Perry Clark, the Miami coach that day and a pretty good coach in my book, was announcing the Pitt-Marquette game and said that he remembered Carl very well from that game. I would have sent him a dollar had he added, "In fact, he's a big reason that I'm sitting here right now."

My son, however, was struggling some with Carl's playground-hewn style and, even more, with me defending Carl. At a formative age, he had watched Brandin Knight show how the point guard position should be played and that, as I would come to learn, was that.

Morning After Thoughts

Posted on 1/11/04

We had a birthday party for my father-in-law yesterday and ended up with about 20 people ages 8 months to 86 watching the Pitt game in a pretty small room. My brother-in-law, in from Providence, and his family. My wife's cousin we sit with at the games and his wife, who I insist must sit to my right. Our good friend, who compares every Pitt athlete to "the Dorsett standard." Our Cleveland cousins came in too. Quite a thrill,

and again to watch it on tape last night. Watching Krauser's drive and the whole Pitt bench mobbing him, my wife and I agreed: the pure joy of youth. That's college basketball.

The Krauser debate continues a bit in our house, especially because yesterday's mutual high pick-and-roll fest turned this into an NBA style dribble-athon, albeit a modestly fascinating one. But nobody in our house disputes that Carl is not afraid of anything or anybody.

Here's an odd comparison for Jaron Brown: Jaromir Jagr. In his prime, Jagr was the greatest third-period hockey player in the world because he just wore out teams by then with his physical play. I see a lot of that in Jaron at the end of games.

16-0. More tough games ahead, and probably some losses soon. But yesterday shows that this team will not crack at the first sign of adversity.

17-15

JANUARY 12, 2004	PITT 74 NOTRE DAME 71
JANUARY 17, 2004	PITT 59 RUTGERS 49
JANUARY 19, 2004	UConn 68 PITT 65

As has happened a remarkable number of times in the past seven years, Pitt gained more credibility in a courageous defeat at UConn, in which Carl Krauser had 24 points and freshman Antonio Graves missed a good look at a three to tie at the buzzer, than in the 18 straight victories that preceded it.

UConn

Posted on 1/24/04

“Pitt looked like Pitt.” That was something we had suspected but could not know for sure until they played a really good team on the road.

I would add though that the “Pitt looked like Pitt” view was not unanimous in our house. So, perhaps, it should be “Pitt pretty much looked like Pitt, but without Brandin, without as much in transition, without as much depth, without getting Julius in the flow at key times, sometimes a little less help defense, and without getting as many good looks for Chevy, but with more points from Carl, blocks from Taft and with Jaron in the post at 6-2 and a half.” Or something.

I really like the way UConn plays. I love the way Okafor conducts himself and I will pay Taliek Brown the high compliment that he plays like a Pitt player. If Pitt can’t win

the national championship this year, which would require a lot of moons aligning, I would be very happy if UConn, which can, did.

17-15

JANUARY 24, 2004

PITT 66 @ SYRACUSE 45

Led by star freshman center Chris Taft, Pitt sliced up the Syracuse 2-3 zone by feeding the high post and beat Syracuse by double figures for the fourth time in five games. It was a 21-point road win over what turned out to be a Sweet 16 Syracuse team.

“We Finally Played Like Last Year”

Posted on 1/24/04

Everybody’s happy.

Except I’m starting to care too much again.

76-12. It’s like a dream.

17-15

JANUARY 28, 2004	PITT 68 BOSTON COLLEGE 58
FEBRUARY 4, 2004	PITT 71 ST. JOHN'S 51
FEBRUARY 7, 2004	PITT 66 @ NOTRE DAME 58
FEBRUARY 9, 2004	SETON HALL 68 PITT 67 (20T)

After another slugfest with BC and the superb Craig Smith, an easy win against a crumbling St. John's team that was to fall off the edge that night in a strip club outside Pittsburgh, and an impressive comeback win after falling behind 15-2 at Notre Dame, Pitt lost in double overtime on the road to a good Seton Hall team with a great guard, Andre Barrett (20 points and 6 assists), who had a terrific battle with his old New York City buddy Carl Krauser (23 points, 3 assists).

The Hall and Everything After

Posted on 2/14/04

Any more, and I am the worst offender, we are so caught up in what a game will mean to seedings, rankings, the RPI and my new favorite, the Pomeroy Index, that we do not always stop and just enjoy the game.

That was a great college basketball game the other night between two fine teams, with streetwise and talented point guards who know each other and who went at each other for 50 minutes, and with the kind of momentum swings that are the hallmark of any great basketball game. Sure, Pitt had

plenty of chances to win, but once Seton Hall got a breath of air from Pitt's suffocating defense with the three-pointer that closed the gap to 55-52, it was clear that either team could win that game. Two father-son moments:

1) Just before it happened, when Pitt was up 56-54, I said to my son: "Do you have any doubt that the Hall is coming down and hitting a 3?" Him: "None."

2) Three minutes after the game, at, literally, the same instant: "Even game."

So Seton Hall is in the books and it's time for UConn. UConn can win the national championship. UConn is capable of running almost every team in the country off the floor. I won't say they can run Pitt off the floor until they do it. If Pitt can control tempo, which I think they can, and keep Jaron, for whom UConn has no match-up, out of foul trouble, I think Pitt will win. Let's call it 67-62. Pitt.

17-15

FEBRUARY 15, 2004 | PITT 75 UCONN 68

Sometimes it is good to step back and just think of the good times. Like beating that season's national champion, for the second year in a row.

UConn

Posted on 2/16/04

I have a few thoughts to add on the game and the mystery of UConn but first I want to pay tribute to the veterans on Pitt's bench, all of whom made big contributions yesterday: Mark McCarroll, Yuri Demetris and Torrie Morris. One of the best parts of college basketball is watching players come in as kids and leave as young men, watching kids who are not players become players.

The bench was the big story yesterday, but not the only story. Jaron Brown dominated the second half of that game. I thought that it would be many years until I would be as sad about a player leaving as I was about Brandin. Jaron will be very close.

I say this as someone who believes in his game, his spirit, and what he means to this team, and as someone who has defended him for three months, but Carl's decision-making can make you want to tear your hair out sometimes.

But you can tell how much Calhoun would like to have a kid

like Carl on his team.

U-C-O-N-N.

I still would not be shocked if UConn won the NCAA tournament. Okafor is overwhelming on defense. Gordon can get his shot anytime he wants. But you do not have to be a genius to see that something is wrong with that team. Heaven knows they have not peaked too early.

Enough about UConn. Pitt is 23 and 2. All things are possible, especially when ten players contribute, including three reserves who are still plugging away after four years.

17-15

My understanding is that the title of the post below is based on something from Cervantes, who, 400 years ago, wrote Don Quixote. I cannot confirm this myself. Although I could name the Providence starting five from 1973, Cervantes is just one of countless important people in history about whom I know almost nothing. I heard this said on a show about a coach who won about as many games as any coach in Indiana high school basketball history but never won the state championship.

"It's the Journey Not the Destination"

Posted on 2/22/04

Although I often agree with him, Bob Smizik in his column today managed to capture exactly the opposite of my feelings for this Pitt team.

According to Bob, anything short of the Final Four will be a disappointment for this team. The rest of the season? Trivial. The Big East tournament? A money-maker. Only the NCAA Tournament will define this team and define it completely.

According to me, no matter what happens the rest of the year, it already has been another thrilling journey, for the third incredible year in a row, and nothing that happens in the NCAA Tournament will change that.

This team already has averaged 27 wins for the past three years,

including lots of big ones. Those games may not matter to Bob Smizik but they matter to the team and, whether it's healthy or not, they matter to me. Not to mention just how this team plays the game, win or lose, which matters most of all.

I also disagree completely about the Big East Tournament. Great as it is, the NCAA is played every other day spread out over three weekends. The Big East is a TOURNAMENT, every night for 4 nights, with teams that know each other. If I were king, the NCAA would play the Sweet 16 to the championship on four straight nights.

I am 46 years old. I get up every morning like a kid, excited for the next game and eager to read and watch everything I can about this team. I am enjoying it with my family, and my friends, including dozens of new Pitt fans who have come along in the past few years. One of them observed that part of my personality, a central part, is that it is important to me that people enjoy what I enjoy. I'm not sure that's healthy either, but it's true.

And I will continue to enjoy, no, to treasure, the journey, wherever it leads.

17-15

FEBRUARY 24, 2004

PITT 68 @ GEORGETOWN 58

After listening to Pitt struggle on the radio on the way home from the airport, I got home in time to see Pitt come back at Georgetown, led by 26 points and 9 rebounds from Carl Krauser. The other notable aspect of this game was that Julius Page, increasingly unable to lift off his bad ankle, shot 0-7, in the beginning stages of a shooting slump that would not end.

Radio Days

Posted on 2/29/04

Anytime, outside of work, there almost always is a TV on wherever I am. It's stifling sometimes. I think that Marshall McLuhan or Aldous Huxley or George Orwell or somebody had it right, although even as I write this I feel like Woody Allen should pull Marshall McLuhan out from behind the curtain like he did in *Annie Hall* to say "you know nothing of my work." Which is true, of course. Because I'm too busy watching TV.

Still, from earliest childhood, long before cable, when it was a thrill to see a game on television, radio always has been a big part of my love of basketball. I remember listening in 1963, when I was six years old, to a Pitt team with Brian Generalovich, Calvin Sheffield and Tim Grgurich while shooting a basketball into a neighbor's laundry tub. A year or two later, and for many years, I shifted my main allegiance to

Duquesne, with Frank Miniotas and Rich Carlberg and Phil Washington and Ron Guziak. I listened to the Steel Bowl in 1964 when Rick Barry scored 75 points in two games.

Except for Barry, I never saw any of those guys play. But I can picture every one of them in my mind's eye.

When I was eight, I loved listening to high school basketball on the radio. My favorite announcer was Sam Vidnovic of McKeesport, especially when he was announcing the games of his son, Glenn Vidnovic, whom I then followed on the radio through a very good career on an excellent Iowa team that also had Chad Calabria from Aliquippa (Dante's father) and two key players from an NBA Championship team in Seattle, John Johnson and Downtown Freddie Brown. I never saw Vidnovic play either. But I know his game. 6-5. Skinny, with a lot of skills, and willing to mix it up inside.

Fast forward, past listening to Kentucky and Cawood Ledford and Rupp's Runts and Mike Casey and Dan Issel. Saturday nights picking up LSU games in Pittsburgh from Baton Rouge with Pistol Pete and Al "Apple" Sanders. Sitting outside on a street and listening to Bernie O'Keefe take down Providence and Marvin Barnes just before Duquesne slipped into the abyss.

Past a Friday night with a girl who put up with driving all over town to pick up a Philly radio station to get the NCAA scores, and, after all that, pulling it in a hundred yards away from

where we started, not knowing that, years later, I would build a house another hundred yards away and move in with three kids and the same girl.

A walk on a cold night on December 19, 2001, listening to a Pitt team hang tough on the road at Ohio State, and knowing what until then we only had suspected.

Almost eerily, having heard rather than seen almost every one of Pitt's few poor efforts the past three years—at Notre Dame in 2002, the first ten minutes of the Georgia game and at Seton Hall last year, and the first half against Georgetown the other night. I don't know why, on the radio, you can tell almost instantly when a team is not ready to play.

On a drive from work the other night, I listened to a long, quiet radio interview, the kind you almost never get on television, conducted by Tim Benz with Brandin Knight. I can't do it justice. Call him. Ask him to play it again. It will tell you everything you need to know about why Pitt has done what it's done the past three years.

17-15

FEBRUARY 29, 2004

SYRACUSE 49 PITT 46 (OT)

MARCH 2, 2004

PITT 88 @ PROVIDENCE 61

After a wrenching overtime loss to Syracuse, Pitt rose up and pounded the 12th-ranked Friars in Providence. The Look, as it turned out, was an illusion. But Providence did not win another game the rest of the season and I maintain that, to this day, it has never recovered from that game.

The Look

Posted on 3/6/04

For better and for worse, my life is in its own rhythm these days. A wave of work and not enough sleep interrupted by the occasional respite and the odd phone call, such as one today saying that that he's been watching and the only things Pitt needs are:

1. More good shots from Julius.
2. More cowbell.

Oh, and Happy Birthday.

Thanks Dad.

Still, I would not want to pass by the performance of the year not only by Pitt but very possibly by any team in college basketball. So if you are happening to read along, just pretend it's four days ago:

You pick up the paper late in the year and see scores that make you go “oh.” Like Syracuse beating Pitt in overtime at Pitt. There are scores that make you go “hmm?” like Stanford almost losing at Washington State, or Duke losing at home to Georgia Tech. But it is only once in a while when you look at a score and go “uh-oh.”

I guarantee that people all over the country who follow basketball, who know basketball, saw that score and went “uh oh.” Late season road game. By 27 points. Coming off a loss. On one day’s rest. Against a ranked team favored by two and bumped to three or three and a half by the “smart money” before the game. That had won by ten at UConn. That was playing its biggest home game in years and years and years.

You are not as good as you look on your best night. There may be a handful or two of teams that may be as good as Pitt. But Pitt is as good as any team in the country. I am certain of it.

Is it possible that with one player, Chris Taft, recruited by the “Big Schools,” and him a freshman, at a school located in an area with almost no players and a modest basketball tradition, and with a coach with no real head coaching experience, this is THE team?

Not with one moon shot of a player, either, a Larry Bird or a Magic Johnson. Instead, with a whole bunch of players, every single one far better than anyone else thought. Players who fit

together just right, not just this year, but for three years, so that each team could build off the accomplishments of the previous year, so that, we can dare hope that there is now a “Pitt” way to play basketball that will last beyond any player or group of players as it has now lasted beyond Ricky and Ontario and Donatas and even, remarkably, Brandin.

When you are The Team, you have The Look. The Look can be a mirage. Or it can be fleeting. Or someone can get hurt. Or something can happen. Pitt had The Look last year against UConn and Indiana.

It’s possible that Providence just got rattled. My son, my caution flag, the one who is just not quite there yet with this team, saw a lot of that on Tuesday. He makes a good point; he always does. But, to me, and even if it’s because I wanted to see it, Pitt had The Look .

So, as you say goodbye to Julius, Torrie and Jaron, and heaven forbid, Chris, Chevy or Carl, watch for The Look.

I think it’s there.

17-15

MARCH 6, 2004	PITT 59 VILLANOVA 45
MARCH 11, 2004	PITT 74 VIRGINIA TECH 61
	[BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 12, 2004	PITT 62 BOSTON COLLEGE 53
	[BIG EAST TOURNAMENT]

Pitt went into the Big East Tournament with its third straight 13-3 record and another Big East regular season championship, just ahead of UConn. They were headed to a third straight classic championship game, the three games that as much as anything define this entire era.

Rivalry

Posted on 3/13/04

Brandin Knight. Caron Butler. Jaron Brown. Emeka Okafor. Julius Page. Ben Gordon. Chevy Troutman. Taliek Brown. Carl Krauser. Josh Boone. Chris Taft. Tony Robertson. Ontario Lett. Rashad Anderson. Donatas Zavackas. Denham Brown.

UConn 74 Pitt 65 (2OT)

Pitt 71 UConn 67

Pitt 74 UConn 56

UConn 68 Pitt 65

Pitt 75 UConn 68

I firmly believe that in 60 years, when I am long gone, our children will be telling their grandchildren about these players and these games. I have been thinking a lot lately about the

Pitt teams of 1927-31 that went 80-11. Are there people who still tell their grandchildren about them?

Tonight is Round Six and Big East Championship Game Three in this remarkable battle. We hope that it will go on and on. We know that it also may disappear into the mists of time, like the 1927-31 teams.

It's a rivalry for UConn. Just listen to Taliek Brown talk about how he hates Pitt. Or the UConn message board posters, like the one who says, and I paraphrase little if at all: "I know I should never root for BC, but I can't help it because I hate Pitt with every fiber in my being."

For Pitt it is THE Rivalry.

17-15

MARCH 13, 2004

| UCONN 61 PITT 58 [BIG EAST FINALS]

UConn went up 13-2. Pitt stormed back, behind Carl and a million steals by Jaron, to lead by nine at the half and 51-40 with eight and a half minutes to play on a sweet three-pointer by freshman Antonio Graves. Which turned out to be the high water mark that night. UConn came back again, with several big three-pointers by Rashad Anderson and Ben Gordon, and won it on a closely-guarded shot by Gordon. This was the night UConn became the championship team everyone had thought they would be. It may never have happened without the games they played against Pitt, especially this one.

Heartbreak

Posted on 3/14/04

Well, it's a little gray here, but the sun did come up this morning.

At halftime, after the best 15 minutes of basketball Pitt has played this year, maybe in many years, I said to my wife and our son that every other team in the league would be done, but not UConn. UConn has not been right all year until this weekend but it still beats with the championship heart of Jim Calhoun.

Two years ago, we could not watch the tape of the UConn game for months. A month or so after the game, I asked my son and he just said "too soon."

I watched this one, alone, early this morning. Very early. Some reactions:

Carl played 38, 40 and 39 minutes in three nights and to me it showed a bit in the last ten minutes last night. But I'll bet he could live to be a hundred and never feel more alive than he did in the last ten minutes of the first half.

Jaron looked a step behind a few times on defense compared to where I'd usually expect him to be, I suspect because of some combination of fatigue, injury and a tough opponent. But his anticipation of passing lanes was absolutely Bird-like.

I never thought I would see the night when Pitt would outscore UConn 20-0 off the bench and lose. Or the night when Torrie Morris took it straight at Emeka Okafor.

Life has not been fair to Julius Page this year. Seeing the guy he played great defense against all night hit the winning shot was just the latest cruel twist. The way he has stood up to all of it and kept playing hurt and playing hard and going to the interview room will serve him well the rest of his life.

Unlike last year when Donatas was an excellent post defender too, there is a huge gap between Chevy and Pitt's second-best post defender (who might be Jaron at 6-2). As a result, Jamie treats Chevy's minutes like gold and he sits for long stretches just to increase the chance that he will be around at the end.

Taliek Brown is a winning ball player. He confirmed his status as a curse on Pitt last night; Brown made some great plays in transition and, a poor foul shooter, he drilled two key foul shots. He also shot an air ball and a near air ball from within three feet in the last five minutes and those misses turned into five UConn points.

When it's all said and done, UConn won and I salute them. At a certain level the better team always wins.

This was a tough loss. Between Jaron's and Julius's ankles and DT says Carl's shoulder, Pitt came out of this tournament less healthy than when it came in. Also, Pitt's seeding is likely not to be as good as it would have been, although if Pitt drops below a Number 2 seed at 29-4 there should be an investigation.

If they can regroup, though, Pitt stands on the cusp of great opportunity. Pitt-UConn is now being talked about as one of the top rivalries in college basketball. As Bob Ryan just said on "The Sports Reporters": "I'd like to see these teams play a seven game series."

People are starting to recognize that there is something stirring about the way they play basketball.

17-15

MARCH 19, 2004	PITT 53 CENTRAL FLORIDA 44 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]
MARCH 21, 2004	PITT 59 WISCONSIN 55 [NCAA TOURNAMENT]

Pitt's seeding in the 2004 NCAA Tournament was among the worst in the history of the NCAA tournament. 29-4 with many, many quality wins and the only losses being two last-second road and neutral court losses to national champion UConn, a team Pitt also beat; an overtime loss to a Sweet 16 Syracuse team that Pitt also beat on the road by 21; and a double overtime road loss to a Seton Hall team that beat Arizona in the NCAAs. That's it. For which Pitt, at 29 and 4, was rewarded with not only the lowest Number 3 seed, but also with having to play Big Ten conference tournament champion Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

All of which made—and still makes—Pitt's win over Wisconsin in front of 18,000 gracious but rabid Wisconsin fans, and us, that much sweeter.

Here We Go

Posted on 3/23/04

There are tapes and tapes and tapes, hundreds of them. Tapes that never see the light of day. Tapes to watch the day after the game. Tapes to watch once in a blue moon. Tapes to watch over and over again:

UCLA-N.C.State [Final Four] 1974

Indiana State-Arkansas [Midwest Regional Finals] 1979

Syracuse @ Pitt 1987

Pitt @ Syracuse 1988

Pitt-UConn [Big East Tournament Finals] 2002

Pitt-UConn [Big East Tournament Finals] 2003

Pitt-UConn [Big East Tournament Finals] 2004

And if I can get a copy of Providence-Memphis State 1973,
or even just the first half, I can someday die a happy man.

Now, there is one more:

Pitt @ Wisconsin [NCAA Tournament] 2004

This was a road game. Against a very good team, a Sweet 16
team, at least.

That they won on guts.

That they never should have had to play.

But there are things that just don't come across on the tape:

Players on both teams bouncing off the player of the game,
Chevy Troutman.

Jaron's stop and explode spin move.

Chevy's three-point play hanging on the rim and falling in.

Julius, stealing like Jaron, taking off and almost losing the ball but dunking hard even with his bum ankle, for the first time in weeks.

Chris Taft just detonating out of nowhere on a slam-tip at the most critical moment.

Watching Carl Krauser, time and again, pulling the ball back and starting over while Jaron stood there as calm as a man fishing in a stream, and knowing that the crowd was not going to shake them.

The sick feeling every time the ball left Devin Harris's hand.

The unbridled joy of Antonio Graves.

So now we go.

Oklahoma State. This is not a Sweet 16 game. This is a Final Four game. 29-3 in the Big 12 against 31-4 in the Big East. Give me a break.

Oklahoma State can win this game. But Pitt's going to win this game.

Here We Go.

17-15

MARCH 25, 2004

OKLAHOMA STATE 63 PITT 51

[NCAA SWEET 16]

2003-2004 RECORD: 31-5

I don't think it's humanly possible to say more about this game than I did. This is the short version. In the end, Pitt tried, desperately, to break through the Sweet 16 barrier after three straight tries, but they just couldn't.

That's It, Good Season

Posted on 4/3/04

It has become a tradition between my son and me that, after the last game of the season, no matter how painful or sudden the final loss, we turn to each other and say, quietly:

“That’s it. Good season.”

This is from the preposterous end to the otherwise enjoyable *Remember the Titans*, when Ed Henry, the coach of the team that has just lost the state championship to Denzel Washington’s Titans on a 75-yard end around on the last play of the game turns to his assistant and says as calmly as a man watching the last sunset of summer:

“That’s it. Good season.”

There must be a lesson in there somewhere, and besides it always makes us laugh and feel a little better.

But for many people who are paid money to write about games that kids play for almost nothing and for more than a few people on this message board and others like it, they need that last loss, preferably as gut-wrenching as possible, so that they can pursue what appears to be their true passion in sports and life. Recrimination Season:

Carl dribbles too much.

Julius shoots too much.

Julius shoots too little.

Carl shoots too much.

Chevy and Chris feel lonely and unloved.

Jamie loves everyone too much to put his foot down.

Joanie loves Chachie.

Really, it's a miracle that they won a game.

My better instinct is just to let it pass. Far be it from me to let that get in the way. In any event, let me get off my chest what I think is a more balanced view of the Oklahoma State game and the season.

The Oklahoma State Game.

First, some due credit to Oklahoma State. I'm not sure that there are any truly great teams in college basketball anymore, and in my opinion Oklahoma State is not one, but it's a very good team. All in all they were an Eddie Sutton-coached team and on this night they clearly were the better team.

As for Pitt, my opinion changed a good bit after watching the tape. One impression did not change: that Pitt got tired in the last eight minutes and, as a team, hit the wall and had their great heart broken in the last three minutes, not unlike UConn when Pitt blew open a close game at the end of last year's Big East final.

The rest of my impression changed substantially. At the game, I thought that a bunch of little things on offense finally caught up with Pitt. A little too much one-on-one by Carl. Not working the ball as well. Not running efficiently. Not enough "passing up good shots for great shots." On the tape there was some of that to be sure.

But more than anything, THIS TEAM JUST COULD NOT SHOOT THE DARN BALL.

Time after time, there was good movement and good chemistry that led to a good shot and sometimes a very good shot. And a miss.

Sometimes it's good to step back and see yourself as others see you. Billy Packer's shortcomings are well-known and of long standing. It was nostalgic to see him reprise, 25 years later, his Indiana State bash of 1979, and it was only right that when this year's target, St. Joe's, proved him wrong they did it by beating his alma mater, Wake Forest. But when he is not colored by this transparent agenda, I have no doubt that Billy Packer knows college basketball inside out. In both the Syracuse and Oklahoma State games it was clear to me that he liked Pitt, a lot in fact, and marveled at them, as summed up best by the statement (I paraphrase) in the Oklahoma State game that "Pitt has done remarkably well for a team that has absolutely no perimeter game."

Anymore, just about every team has a serious flaw, even the best teams. Eventually, every team but one will lose (I think, hope and pray that UConn will be that team) and, usually, it is a team's flaws that take it down.

Pitt's flaw was that they could not shoot, and in the Oklahoma State game it knocked them out of the tournament. I always thought they were just about to snap out of it and shoot like they did for the first three quarters of the year. But it never happened.

The Look.

I was wrong even if, with eight minutes to go in the Big East Finals, most of America would have agreed. I thought the 27-

point road win at Providence on one day's rest after the Syracuse loss was so extraordinary and I still do. But in the happy glow of 88 points and great passing and running and dominating inside play, I overlooked the 2-9 three-point shooting against Providence. What I thought was the ebb and flow of an average shooting team was in fact the early stage of a fatal disease.

The Season.

Still and all. 31 and *freakin'* 5. I confess to having had two personal aspirations for Pitt which have had an irrational importance to me. One is for Pitt to be ranked Number 1 at a meaningful point in the season. They missed that by less than one second last year, and it might never happen. The other was 30 wins. Done.

This era, however long it lasts, will only get sweeter with age. I will remember this as a family time, of our time with our children. I doubt we ever have had a better family trip than the one we took to Wisconsin, unless it was to Boston last year visiting my sister and her family, all properly raised as Pitt fans in BC country.

So, for now, it is done. Maybe this will be it.

But it doesn't have to be.

There always is so much more to accomplish.

Team Basketball. Defense. Old School.

Let's Go Pitt.

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