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Prologue

Tuesday Night, March 13, 2007

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

Thursday, March 15, 2007

Friday, March 16, 2007

Saturday, March 17, 2007

Sunday, March 18, 2007

Epilogue

Dan Rather

The first weekend of the NCAA basketball tournament brings a dedicated legion of basketball bettors to Las Vegas. From early Thursday morning until Sunday evening, men—and the crowd is overwhelmingly male—sit in rowdy smoky casinos watching up to forty-eight college basketball games. Who are these people? They pay to fly out to Las Vegas, spend money on lodging, sit for four days straight watching basketball games, and often lose hundreds of dollars on near misses and if onlys, and yet as they taxi to the airport on Sunday evening they are planning their betting strategy for the following year with undiminished passion.

In March 2003 the NCAA considered canceling the NCAA tournament because the start of the games coincided with the beginning of the Iraq war. On Tuesday evening, March 18, during an internationally televised address, President George Bush announced that Saddam Hussein had twenty-four hours to give himself up. If Hussein did not do so, sometime after the twenty-four hours had elapsed the United States would strike.

On Wednesday night—twenty-four hours later to the minute—two planeloads of basketball bettors waited by an America West gate at New York’s Kennedy airport for their flights to Las Vegas. Both flights were completely sold out. Above the bar where the travelers were clustered, television anchors described the beginnings of the war.

The men at the bar paid no attention to newscaster Peter Jennings. They were looking at their NCAA tournament brackets.

On Thursday morning, hours after the United States had launched its attack, the tension at the Tampa International airport was palpable. Reporters randomly asked passengers if they were unnerved. Baggage underwent more scrutiny than usual, and security at the airport was extensive. I boarded my Southwest flight to Las Vegas with some anxiety. I was not settled into my seat for more than two minutes when a fellow in front of me—a stranger—turned around and asked me if I thought Marquette could cover the spread.

Later that day I was seated in the Paris Hotel on Las Vegas Boulevard—the Strip—watching the games. The Paris theater was filled with bettors from all over the country who, apparently, were not troubled by the international crisis. Four movie screens were suspended from the ceiling above the stage. The well-oiled spectators who filled the theater were focused on the four basketball games projected on the giant screens. When Dan Rather periodically interrupted the contests with reports from Baghdad, the booing in the theater was deafening.

Who Are These Guys

The first words he reads in the morning are in the sports section of the newspaper. He pores over these pages while drinking coffee, chewing his toast, and using the bathroom. He studies box scores like a scholar examining minute details of important texts.

At the end of the week, when he picks up the clutter that has accrued in the apartment, he finds folded-up sports pages from days ago that have been left near the toilet.

He is familiar with the traditional fall, winter, spring, and summer seasonal designations but nevertheless tends to identify portions of the year by what sport is played. Autumn is not so much autumn as it is football season. April does not mark the beginning of spring, but baseball season. His index to personal history uses this method to organize and recollect data. “Sure, I remember when I had my last checkup. It was during football season. It was on a Monday after the game when the Packers beat the Bears in overtime.”

He can identify the entire rosters of the teams to which he has allegiance. He is buoyed by his teams’ victories and depressed by their defeats. On some nights he cannot fall asleep after a close game that has ended in a loss or after he has watched a particularly exciting contest.

Things bother him that are, at most, on the periphery of consciousness for most people. He cannot understand, for example, the designated hitter rule or why the NCAA holds no tournament to decide the championship in college football. He exasperates relatives who have limited interest as he explains his perspective and rationale at the annual family Thanksgiving gathering.

He is an unusually superstitious person. He stands on one foot when an opponent is shooting a crucial free throw because on a number of occasions this posture has jinxed players at critical points. Near the end of an NFL playoff game he once forbid the fifteen-year-old daughter of a friend from going to the bathroom because the teenager had been, up until then, seated in a place that he deemed to be a lucky spot.

ESPN has been a godsend for him. Life before SportsCenter seems like a primitive era, akin to a past when one had to live

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without indoor plumbing or electricity. He would sooner walk barefoot over broken glass than move to an area that did not have cable television. The proliferation of sports on television, with ESPN, ESPN2, the NFL network, and other dedicated sports channels, has made a substantive difference in his life.

When he met a woman on a blind date and she told him she does not understand the big deal made in this country about sports, he knew that the relationship would not launch. He thinks his friend Mark's wife, a Jets fan who wears her "Pennington" jersey every Sunday (even during bye weeks), is a true find. Mark, he often marvels, hit the jackpot.

His refrigerator magnets pin the menus from Chinese restaurants and submarine shops. The schedule for the Boston Red Sox obscures the emergency numbers for the fire and police departments.

He considers that a genuine advantage to living on the West Coast is to be able to watch Sunday football games beginning at 10 a.m.

When he first walked into a Las Vegas Sports Book on the morning of the initial Thursday of the NCAA basketball tournament he felt that he was in heaven.

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Epilogue

I Love Virginia

I'm waiting for my flight to Las Vegas at a long narrow table in an airport bar. A tall, lean fellow is seated to my right. He's wearing navy slacks and a pinstriped button-down shirt. A well-worn suede leather jacket is draped over his chair. He has pushed a half-eaten sandwich away so he can stare at a document in front of him. Every now and again, he takes an absent-minded swig from a beer in a pint glass.

The document he's studying and scribbling on is an NCAA tournament bracket sheet. I engage him and discover, not to my surprise, that he too is going to Las Vegas. We will be taking the same flight this evening. He introduces himself as Buddy. In a short time, he tells me that he does not really "do basketball" in Vegas, but instead spends time on the gaming tables.

"Every year I go meet up with college buddies during March Madness. They're nuts," he says. He waves his right arm forward like he is tossing a crumpled piece of paper into a wastebasket, not pretending to shoot a foul shot, but rather emphasizing his "you can have it" attitude toward his college buddies' habits.

He shakes his head and waves his arm again in the same way.

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“They’re nuts. I swear they’ll watch every single game. Sit in the sports book for twelve straight hours. Only budge to get beer. Occasionally go stuff themselves at a buffet. Forty-eight basketball games. You think I’m kidding? I’m not kidding. I mean, how much basketball can you watch?”

“That’s a lot of basketball.”

“Sure is. Not for me. I play blackjack.”

“Blackjack, eh?”

“Blackjack. Not even going to sleep tonight.”

“Not sleeping? What do you mean you are not sleeping?”

“Not sleeping. Get to Vegas and it is time to play blackjack. We land, I grab my bag, go directly to the tables.” He waves his arm, this time like a football referee signaling a first down. “Directly to the tables. I’ll sleep tomorrow morning. I’m not watching forty-eight basketball games.”

I point to the tournament bracket sheet he has been completing.

“Hey,” he says, “as long as I’m going, I’ll fill them out.” Then he pauses a few seconds before asking a question. “You like Virginia?”

“I love Virginia,” I say.

•••

I know very little about handicapping college basketball games. I began traveling to Las Vegas for March Madness in 2001 after hearing about an article that listed a hundred things to do before you die. One of the recommended activities was to visit Las Vegas during the first weekend of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. Then I read a short piece in *Sports Illustrated* that made the same point. I went.

It was, as advertised, a unique experience, entertaining and in its own way fascinating. I skipped the 2002 tournament, but

since 2003 I have been visiting Las Vegas annually in March. During my third trip, it crossed my mind that the quirky characters I met on those weekends represented a distinct and intriguing subculture worth studying. Consequently, in the course of enjoying the experience of March Madness as a participant, I became an observer, researcher, and note taker.

I have been a sports enthusiast since childhood. I am old enough to have taped pictures of the 1957 New York Knickerbockers on the bedroom wall. When I was ten, I shook hands, awestruck, with the great Connie Hawkins at a gym in Brooklyn when he was still a senior at Boys High School. As a preteen, I watched Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) play a preliminary game at the old Madison Square Garden when he was only a freshman at Power Memorial. I've played college basketball on a University of Albany freshman team and coached youngsters in recreational leagues and at summer camp. I may know more about the game than the average person.

As it relates to betting, however, I'm no more of an expert than the common fan, except that I know that I could not be much more of an expert than the common fan. Wagering on most sporting events, the NCAA basketball tournament included, is like betting on the flip of a coin: wisdom, knowledge, and experience are limited assets. Hardly any of the thousands who will be traveling to Las Vegas this weekend to wager on the games know enough about handicapping to do anything other than contribute to the collective wealth of the state of Nevada. They cannot wait to get there to begin making deposits.

I know I know nothing, but nevertheless, I do love Virginia in its first-round game. I tell that to Buddy, my new friend the blackjack player.

"You sure?"

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“Run from anyone who tells you he’s sure,” I say.

He laughs and continues filling out his brackets.

“Vegas is some town,” he says with his head down. “Do you know there are still only about seven cab companies that control all the traffic from the airport?”

“No, I did not know that.”

“Crazy place,” he says. “A lot of the people who go to Vegas, man, are wack jobs.” He shakes his head.

“You mean like the kind of guys who play blackjack all night?”

Buddy picks up his head and laughs. “Yeah, maybe I’m a wack job too. But only for one weekend a year. And I’m nothing like my friends the basketball junkies. They’re crazy.” He pushes his hand forward.

Another man arrives and parks himself at our table. He hails the waitress before his rump hits the chair and shouts for a beer. Twenty-four ounces or sixteen, she wants to know—twenty-four for him.

This man is oozing March Madness. He wears jeans, running shoes, and a blue sweatshirt with “Syracuse” in orange on the front. His baseball cap is turned backward. He’s placed an accordionlike file folder on the table space in front of him and, once settled, yanks this morning’s *USA Today* out of one of the pockets.

“You going to Las Vegas for the tournament?” I ask, knowing that it is an unnecessary question.

“Every year.” He’s working on the bracket sheets with a pen.

“Ink?”

He snorts and doesn’t look up.

“You seem confident.”

Again he snorts and waves dismissively.

“Sorry about Syracuse.”

Syracuse, a perennial college basketball power, has not been invited to play in this year's tournament.

"We were screwed," he says. But he doesn't look up from the bracket sheets. He's busy. It's Tuesday. The tournament begins on Thursday.

I swing around on my chair and notice a table of four young men. They're joking and poring over bracket sheets. There's another cluster of three at a table to the right of Buddy. I walk over to them and see that they're jawing over a bracket pullout from *Sports Illustrated*.



On the plane I sit next to a woman who knows nothing about basketball. She finds it amusing, almost astonishing, that people would fly to Las Vegas to watch basketball games. Bewildered, she asks me several questions. She is traveling to a convention for entrepreneurs who sell health-related products. She is also a prolific author and within minutes is aggressively peddling the various unusual books she has written. We're not across the Mississippi before she's sold me one of her books: *How to Have Sex in the Woods*.



It's midnight when we arrive. Despite the hour, there is a long line for people looking for cabs. I meet a young man on the queue who has traveled to Las Vegas so he can attend a bachelor party.

"Your own?" I ask.

"Nah. College buddy. He's not getting married until June but he and the rest of us are all basketball nuts. We figured we'd combine the party with the games."

We talk about the tournament. He tells me he once guarded