

The Final Four: No Substitute for Being There

The smoke has cleared from the Kansas City barbecue, and Stacey King has announced that he will be back for his senior season. The pain of falling just one victory short of the national championship has lessened (somewhat), and we've all gone on to other things. But this is the first *Sooner Magazine* since the Final Four, and no true basketball fan who spent her youth in the old Field House "waiting 'til next year" can be expected to pass up a brief reflection on 1987-88.

It was a wonderful season, the best in OU history, the best of any team in the nation — save one. The Boys of Winter proved for all time the validity of Burr's Law: "It's More Fun to Win than to Lose" — and the corollary to that truism: "There's No Substitute for Being There."

The fun part started in November, and except for mid-season road glitches at Louisiana State, Kansas State and Missouri, continued right on to the Final Four — make that the Final "Two." The cameraman for "Wide World of Sports" should have fol-

lowed the '87-88 Sooners around; he could have gotten miles of new footage on the thrill of victory before that one last heart-wrenching glimpse of the agony of defeat.

Records fell like tenpins, five NCAA marks and 41 in the Big Eight, the most in conference history. Some of the more notable: Mookie Blaylock led the conference (and nation) in steals with Ricky Grace second; Grace led in Big Eight assists with Blaylock second; Harvey Grant tied for the rebounding title; Stacey King was the first ever to top 100 blocked shots; Grace also was the top 3-point shooter, followed by Dave Sieger and Blaylock. There were lots of others—the team was second in the nation in scoring average while breaking its own scoring record in the conference. Meanwhile Sieger was named to the Big Eight's all-academic team for the third straight year.

The Sooners rolled through the NCAA preliminaries at Atlanta and Birmingham while 60 other teams were falling to the wayside. The first game in Kansas City (with Arizona) was a masterpiece, termed by at least

one network broadcaster as the best of all the NCAA tournament contests. The Sooners may not have been the sentimental favorites, but they were certainly the most exciting group to come along in a long time. In short, this team did everything but beat Big Eight rival Kansas for the third time in the season, while the Jayhawks put it all together in one grand victorious onslaught.

There was no joy for the outnumbered Sooner fans in Kemper Arena that night. But given time to absorb the disappointment, no card-carrying basketball fanatic would have been anywhere else. Say what you will about the convenience and comfort of watching from the living room couch, it's nothing in the world like being there. A big-time basketball game has its own pulse. It isn't just the action on the floor; it's the feeling of the crowd around you, the din in your ears, the momentum shifting from team to team. Pull the picture down to the eye of the camera, and you have lost the flavor of the contest.

Sooner fans are no strangers to playing for a national title; Switzer's team does it regularly — this year in the Orange Bowl, in fact. But even a victory there is still subject to the judgment of the pollsters. The Final Four is different and satisfyingly clear-cut. The gruelling process comes down to a one game, winner-take-all championship.

They tell me that some wags in Dallas have printed T-shirts featuring caricatures of coaches Switzer and Tubbs with nooses around their necks and the legend below reading "Chokelahoma," alluding to the only school ever to play for both national titles in the same year. Oh, did I mention Burr's Other Law? "Better to have played and lost, than to have watched the proceedings on TV."

—CJB

