

When “March Madness” is in full swing,
the NCAA depends on a Sooner
to direct the “Big Dance.”

BILL HANCOCK'S ROAD TO THE FINAL FOUR

BY ED FROST



Bill Hancock knows how to keep the Final Four in perspective. “It’s not OU-Texas,” says this 1972 Sooner journalism graduate who manages the “Big Dance.” “It seems like any other job to me.”

Don’t get Hancock wrong—he loves what he does as Director of the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship. “I can’t think of a better job anywhere,” he admits, “unless you could get paid for hiking outdoors in the sunshine.”

continued



It's just that when Hancock thinks big, he thinks OU-Texas, betraying his Oklahoma roots and OU background. Every year Hancock kicks off OU-Texas week with a family ritual that began when sons Will and Nathan were tots.

"On Monday we'd put on a stereo tape of 'Boomer Sooner' and 'Texas Fight' to wake them up in the morning," he explains. With his sons grown, Hancock continues the tradition by telephone, allowing that "they'd be disappointed if we didn't." The custom thus continues although Will, 28, is now, ironically, a media relations coordinator in the Athletic Department at Oklahoma State University. Hancock's way to wake the children for school was novel, but he is a fellow with a lot of novel ideas and a zest for life.

Reflecting on his position, Hancock does not hesitate when he says that "March Madness" is not as big as OU-Texas—for him. "No, I don't think so," he says firmly, "and maybe that's why I've been successful in this job." That glamorous post at the NCAA is "like any other" to Bill Hancock because he grew up with tunnel vision focused on college football, not college basketball.

As an Oklahoman coming of age in the Bud Wilkinson era, Hancock was enamored of the football Sooners. "I never held basketball in awe," he explains, adding, "Now, I love it, but I am not intimidated by it." It would be easy to be intimidated by an event that holds much of the nation spellbound and rivals the Super Bowl in its mass appeal, but Hancock is not.

He was in awe of Wilkinson and his football legions and traces his passionate interest in sports to those childhood memories. "When I was about four, my folks would drive to the OU games," he recalls, "and they'd always bring me trinkets afterwards. I learned to read the newspaper by reading every word about the OU games and keeping a scrapbook of the clippings." He was seven when "the streak" ended—the 1957 loss to Notre Dame that snapped the Sooners' 47-game victory string. "I remember everything about the day," he muses, "including almost the exact

Reflecting on his position, Hancock does not hesitate when he says that "March Madness" is not as big as OU-Texas—for him. "No, I don't think so," he says firmly, "and maybe that's why I've been successful in this job."

seat where I was sitting."

Now 47, Hancock is in his ninth year of directing the NCAA's yearly extravaganza, and he has grown fond of the sport he largely ignored as a youth. "It's a real grass-roots deal," he describes the game invented on American soil by Dr. James Naismith. "Unlike pro sports," he points out, "college basketball is played in all 50 states, and you can find it within a half-day drive of every hamlet in the country. That's what I love about it."

How many people think he can get them tickets to the Final Four? Hancock laughs a long time at that one before allowing, "Oh, boy, far too many—it's a headache."

Well, *can* he get those tickets? "No," he answers flatly. "What I do is say no to everyone but my brother and sister. Some old friend from the J School will call and say, 'Hi, Bill. This is Fred Smith. We were in reporting class together.' I say, 'Hi, Fred—no.'" "Fred" represents lots of old pals at tournament time.

Hancock was born into a Hobart newspaper family. His late father, Ransom Hancock, was publisher of *The Hobart Democrat-Chief*, and

Hancock's brother Joe, also an OU graduate, publishes the paper now. Bill Hancock gives care and feeding to his Oklahoma roots and still writes, from his suburban Kansas City home, a column for his brother's paper.

"I am a decent writer and an average musician, not an athlete," he says. But his activities belie the statement, and there is one athletic accomplishment of which he is especially proud. A peripatetic type who bikes and runs marathons, has hiked the Grand Canyon and climbed Mt. Rainier, Hancock has a particular note of satisfaction in his voice when he recounts running in the famed Boston Marathon, "because you have to qualify for that one." To date he has completed 15 marathons, including the other famous one, in New York City, twice.

Hiking the Grand Canyon rim to rim, Hancock had a firsthand view of something he learned about in an OU geology class, the Vishnu Schist, a distinctive layer of metamorphic rock that underlies most of the Canyon. "You had to go clear to the bottom to see it," he relates. "Later, I figured I had been to the depths—let's go to the heights." So he climbed Mt. Rainier in Washington. "That's something I wouldn't like to repeat," he chuckles, adding that it was "very un-Oklahoma-like—cold, with snow up to your waist." But Hancock, never among the faint of heart, is always looking for a challenge.

Bill found one a few years ago, negotiating the 530-mile "Bike Across Kansas" route with a group of fellow enthusiasts. That set him to wondering if he could bike from Kansas City all the way to the old hometown of Hobart alone—and he did, in the summer of 1996. The journey was 500 miles and took five days to complete. "Everyone thought I was crazy to do it without a support vehicle," he recalls, relishing the memory.

One particular incident he recalls with pleasure stems from his practice along the way of calling ahead to reserve a motel room each night. One day he called Watonga for a reservation. "When I asked this nice lady how much it was going to be," Hancock remembers, "she got very apologetic

and said, 'Well, we're having our Blaine County Fair, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to charge you \$28 for your room.' I knew then I was back among the friendly folks," he says with a chuckle.

The Kansas City-to-Hobart story triggered Hancock's recollection of an earlier bike trip. "When I was at OU," he remembers, "I tried to ride my bike from Norman to Hobart, but I didn't make it." He laughed when he conjured up images of the attempt—sleeping under a school porch in Verden to escape the rain and being set upon by a dog in Anadarko. "That did it," he says. "I called my wife and told her to come get me."

Talking of marathons also revealed OU roots. He was "inspired by a bunch of guys at OU who ran, mostly barefoot, on the football practice field at lunch time." The group included the late SID emeritus Harold Keith, basketball coach John MacLeod and football assistant Jerry Pettibone. They ran until head football boss Chuck Fairbanks discovered they were wearing a path on the field. The sessions, however, sparked Hancock's interest in running, and he later ran his first marathon at Gage, Oklahoma, before going on to those in the big cities.

Hancock does not get to Norman and Oklahoma City much nowadays, but he dropped by an extra time or two this year. On March 13 and 15, 1998, OU was the host institution for the first and second rounds of the Midwest Region of the NCAA tournament, played at the Myriad in Oklahoma City.

Checking out sites and going over details required him to spend 120 nights away from home last year. Wife Nicki, also a Hobart native, can put up with it, Hancock says, "because she's very independent, and we do some take-me-along travel." Utilizing the summer and Christmas breaks, Nicki managed to go along for about 30 of



Bill Hancock, leaning over the counter to the right of the white pillar, cut his professional teeth in the OU press box in 1970 working as a student assistant to Sports Information Director John Keith, second from right. Nostalgia note: OU's offensive yards—412 rushing, 205 passing—are registered on the meter at far left.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

those 120 away nights. Hancock calls daily when he is on the road alone, and she is back in Kansas teaching school. Nicki is also a Sooner, having spent her first three years of college at OU. But when Hancock's father died, he went home for four years to help his brother run the paper, and she finished her degree at nearby Southwestern Oklahoma State in Weatherford.

Would Hancock like to direct the NCAA tournament and see his alma mater win it? You get the feeling the answer is a diplomatic yes when he explains the difference in his current situation and his position with the Big 8 Conference. Then (1978-89), he bent over backward to be neutral and downplayed being from OU, "because I was working for a family of eight, and it wouldn't have been good to be perceived as leaning heavily toward one of the eight.

"Now," he explains, "I'm working for a family of 900, and it doesn't matter so much that I am from one of those 900-some institutions. So I let it be

known where I'm from and that I'm proud of it." He can laugh now but recalls being embarrassed when he remembers how Billy Tubbs, then the OU basketball coach, would call the Big 8 office to speak to "the Sooner."

His Big 8 background, which stemmed from his OU experiences, landed Hancock the prestigious spot he now occupies. In 1988 Tubbs took a great OU team to the final game, losing to Kansas in Kansas City. Hancock was then assistant commissioner of the Big 8, which was hosting the Final Four; he received a lot of exposure as co-chair of the local organizing committee. At the time, two or three NCAA staff members managed the tournament as parts of their jobs.

"In 1989," he recalls, "they decided it needed a full-time staff" and invited him to come talk about the position that was being created. "So I got the job," he deadpans, "probably because I was already living in Kansas City, and they wouldn't have to pay any moving expenses."

Ironically Hancock was not even



aware of the tournament until the early '70s. Today basketball is his livelihood, and he loves it. "When every team starts practice around October 15," he notes, "those college students are all dreaming of playing in the tournament, and this event *is* for the kids. It's an honor just to be associated with it."

Hancock has learned to appreciate the players, the coaches, the game and the massive amount of detail required to run the tournament when March rolls around. The details, of course, are planned long before they happen, and Hancock is directly responsible for a great number of them. Having a tournament in a building is very different from what takes place on a day-to-day basis in that building, he explains. "What I am is a teacher. I teach the people there how to run the tournament. I look at the locker rooms, the interview areas, the drug-testing area, the souvenir stands—everything."

Even though his father-in-law asks, "You mean all you *do* is athletics?" and Hancock answers, "Yes," it is not quite as simple as it sounds. "At least 20 of my trips each year are directly related to the tournament for that year," he says, "and I visit each city and go over everything. I may spend three or four hours going over each building in detail. Then I meet with the hotel staffs and explain how to take care of the teams. Each city has a budget for the tournament they're hosting, and I meet with their financial officers."

When management becomes complicated, Hancock gratefully remembers sitting at the side of the late Ken Farris at OU, soaking up information on budgetary matters. "He was so well organized," Hancock says.

"Consistency at the sites is what we're after," continues Hancock. "We want the tournament to look the same in Oklahoma City, Anaheim or Hartford."

A major change in the scene since Hancock arrived is that CBS now has exclusive TV rights to the tournament. And, of course, the amount of money corporations pay for a 30-second commercial spot during the Final Four is now an astronomical sum. Hancock remains unfazed.

Does he tire of hearing of "March Madness," the "Big Dance," teams that are "on the bubble," and so on? "They're clichés," he allows, "but I like 'em," because they reflect the fans' enthusiasm for the tournament.

fans' enthusiasm for the tournament.

The standards for hosting a Final Four are so high—30,000 seats in the arena, 7,200 first-class hotel rooms within 20 miles—that "only about 10 or 11 cities can do it," Hancock says. This huge undertaking is not necessarily all that profitable for the cities involved. "But it's a pride and spirit thing," he adds, "and when it's over, the city that hosted the tournament can say, 'Wow, we did it,' and that's worth a lot.

"I'm very proud that the tournament has come back to Oklahoma," says Hancock. "It was played at the Myriad in 1977 and didn't return until 1994. The people at OU did a great job then, and I believe there are many more NCAA events in Oklahoma's future."

The 1998 Final Four in San Antonio

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

Then assistant Big Eight commissioner Bill Hancock's work with the NCAA at the 1988 Final Four in his hometown of Kansas City led to his current job directing the Big Dance. That fateful tournament was an all-Big Eight final, with the favored Sooners falling to a Kansas team they had beaten twice in regular season play. With Hancock, left, are his wife, Nicki, and former NCAA media coordinator Dave Cawood.

He is accustomed to the hoopla and enjoys it. Does he tire of hearing of "March Madness," the "Big Dance," teams that are "on the bubble," and so on? "They're clichés," he allows, "but I like 'em," because they reflect the

was Hancock's 20th. His first to attend—he was working for the Big 8—was the famous 1979 match-up of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, when Indiana State took on Michigan State in the final game. Hancock's designated



IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

Each year is a new challenge for NCAA men's basketball tournament director Bill Hancock, here in Seattle in 1995, as the March Madness grows in appeal to both the public and the media.

the news like the puff of smoke signaling the selection of a new pope.

After 19 years of watching and eight of directing the championship tournament, which players stand out in his memory? Magic and Bird? "No—I'd say it'd be the guys I was with at OU," he says. That would be Clifford Ray, Alvan Adams, Scott Martin, Bobby Jack and others who played for John MacLeod in the days before Adams and MacLeod were reunited at Phoenix in the NBA.

"I was working for the Sports Information Department," Hancock recalls, "and I was their age, but I was doing their PR, which was awesome stuff for a 21-year-old."

Recently, Hancock was negotiating with the America West Arena in Phoenix, which wanted to bid on hosting a regional in the tournament. "I got a hand-written note signed 'Alvan,'" Hancock says, "and it was from Alvan Adams. I'm working closely with him and his staff. He's doing great as vice president of America West Arena, and they will be hosting the West Regional in 1999.

"Alvan was always a reluctant superstar," Hancock adds, "and he hasn't changed a bit."

When you talk with Hancock, it becomes apparent that you can take the boy out of the Big 8, but you cannot take the Big 8 (or the Big 12) out of the boy. On the wall behind his desk at the NCAA in Kansas City are two bumper stickers mounted and framed together. One says, "1+2+3=Big 8," and the other, "64-62=Big 8." The first refers to 1971, when Nebraska, OU and Colorado finished 1-2-3 in the final Associated Press football poll, a souvenir from his OU days. Hancock created the second one when OU and Kansas made up the exclusively Big 8 field for the championship game of the 1988 tournament. "After the NCAA semifinals, a light just went on," he recalls.

A lot of folks back home tell him he has the best job in the country, and Hancock does not deny it. His work may not be quite as much fun as an OU-Texas weekend, but it'll come close when the Sooners make it back to the Final Four.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

A serious biker, Bill Hancock is pictured in 1996 just outside Johnson City, near the start of the 500-mile "Bike Across Kansas."

job was to run a hospitality room; now he choreographs the entire show. "I'm part of a team," he emphasizes. On a day-to-day basis, he reports to Tom Jernstedt, the right hand man of Cedric Dempsey, who is executive director of the NCAA.

"The most fascinating part of the

whole process," says Hancock, "is the work done by the Division I Men's Basketball Committee. Those nine guys are our bosses." When "those nine guys" are sequestered in a hotel for four days before the dramatic announcement of the 64 tournament teams, the basketball world waits for