



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

The Final Four and the Final Draw

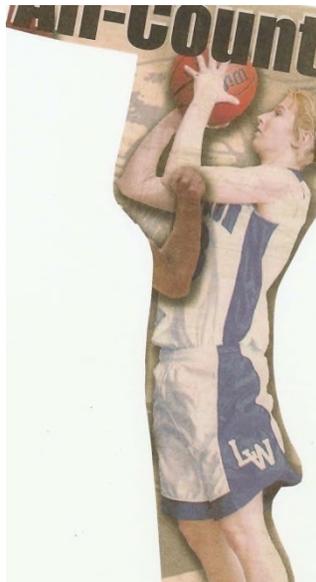
The Final Four and The Final Draw¹

April 5, 2008

Warning: This report contains Mark Twain levels of bragging about the basketball exploits of the Black family. For this writer's skills, my bravado "lurks under a threadbare cloak." But for my relatives, their exploits are in the record books.

Thus warned, hello from Your in the Arm Chair Reporter. This afternoon, I tuned-in to the first part of the UCLA/Memphis NCAA basketball tournament semi-final game. Initially, it was fun to watch, but as the game progressed, I lost interest. For a while, I was not paying attention to the time outs, but as the first half "wore-on," it seemed the TV commercials were consuming as much time as the action on the court.

Basketball Nuts. Before writing about the NCAA games and basketball in general, permit your reporter some diversions. First, we Black family members are basketball nuts. We love the game. In my hometown in New Mexico, we are into our third generation of players and second generation of coaches. This year, my grandniece Kenzie was named the player of the year in Lea County...as a freshman! See Figure 1 for a shot of Kenzie in action.



It gets better: As a freshman (OK, freshman), she set a record for three-pointers (68) in one season. And she is not just a shooter (as most of us Blacks were). She is a great ball handler and passer. I saw her play when she was in junior high, and was impressed with her defense and overall court skills.

My nephew Rick is the father of Kenzie and the coach of Kenzie's team. He has "rescued" three moribund basketball programs in Texas and New Mexico and within a year, brought the teams to---not only winning---but qualifying for state playoffs. I've watched this man coach several games. In one state championship play-off, I witnessed him simply out-coach his opponent to win the game. I thought the other team was physically superior, but Rick evened the score, so to speak, with his skills.

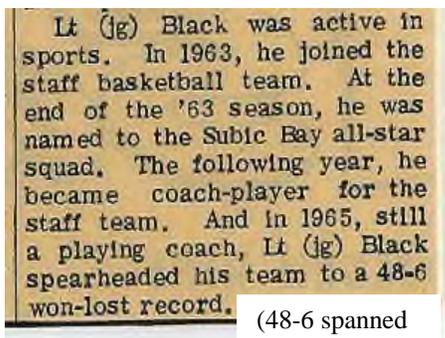
Figure 1. Kenzie in action.

Also, this year my second cousin Cary coached his team to the final four in Texas' AAAAA high school division. For you newcomers, Texas 5A is big time basketball in the Lone Star State. What is amazing about Cary's achievement is the fact that he had no tall players---usually the death knell for a successful team. Even more, he did not have a "Michael Jordan." So, Cary built his team as a *team*. Five of his players averaged in the double figures. I'm not a coach, but I've enough knowledge to know that Cary did some amazing coaching to bring this level of performance from his players.

¹ NCAA image on cover, courtesy of Google.

Thus far, in the Black brood, I count five all-state players, two college conference all-stars, and one junior college All American.² White men can't jump? You should have seen my brothers!

My turn for glory and bragging rights. Truth is, I revere basketball. As a kid, I played the game almost every day on the sand lots in my hometown. I played in high school---12th on a squad of 12. Luckily, I finally started growing and managed to play in college intramurals. Later, I was a player-coach on a Navy team in the Far East, as seen in the press clipping here:



Lt (jg) Black was active in sports. In 1963, he joined the staff basketball team. At the end of the '63 season, he was named to the Subic Bay all-star squad. The following year, he became coach-player for the staff team. And in 1965, still a playing coach, Lt (jg) Black spearheaded his team to a 48-6 won-lost record.

(48-6 spanned two seasons)

Consider this feat! Recruited from a 70-men contingent, we defeated a team from an aircraft carrier, recruited from a contingent of several thousand men. A feat akin to a junior college team beating Duke.

Later, I played night league ball in Washington, DC and Albuquerque, New Mexico. I don't want to overplay my credentials in this sport, which at best were only average. But ego requires a visit to past glory in Asia:

Goodwill. Our Navy basketball team became part of our ship's "goodwill" program. We played teams in Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Okinawa, Hong Kong, and Thailand. On one occasion---our team's first game with a foreigner...Oops, they were not the foreigner. We were the foreigner. Nonetheless, I recall how imported and encapsulated we were. America on the ship in a foreign land: Ice cream and Camels. America on the bases: Pork chops and Pabst Blue Ribbon. Then, venturing out into the populace with the élan of someone who supposedly owned the surroundings.

Small wonder they eventually grew tired of us. During my first day in the Far East, I was on a US military bus transporting my jet-lagged body from Clark Air Force Base to Subic Bay Naval Base. As we passed a group of Filipino children playing in the streets, I waved to them. They responded by throwing me the finger. *Take that Ugly American.*

Perhaps our basketball games with the "foreigners" helped our efforts to develop more friendly relations with these counties. I say perhaps, because we never lost a game to them. On some occasions, I started our second five, and we still held the opponent to a single digit score. We had two Marines on our team who would later play with ACC and Big Ten schools. We did not defeat the aircraft carrier team by accident.

But we lost big time in another sport I had organized for our contingent: Soccer...or as it is called in Asia, football. Usually, our goodwill visits to ports involved: (a) hellos and exchanging banners and watermelons, (b) fielding soccer and basketball teams, (c) depending on the locale, bowing a lot after the two games had ended, (d) depending on the locale, hoisting a few beers with the hosts.

² I am not among this élite group. I enjoy the fame vicariously.

One such occasion was an evening with the British Navy in Singapore:

- Enlisted man, and a member of my Radio Communications crew, “Mr. Black, I’ve never played soccer in my life. Do I have to?”
- Lt (jg) Black, “Smith, if you want shore leave tonight, you start the evening with a game with the Brits.”
- Case closed. Shore leave in Singapore’s sporting bars was worth an hour of sacrifice on Singapore’s sporting fields. Really nothing more than engaging in two contact sports in one evening.



We were not surprised that the Brits’ soccer team kicked our lads into abject humility. My Radioman was a game but pathetic footballer. We were surprised their basketball team scored in the double figures. I kept our first team on the court for a while; then assured of victory, the scrubs cleaned up the second half. For the last glance into past glory in this report, Figure 2 on the left shows your reporter taking the ball to the basket against an Englishman (notice his soccer predisposition to use no hands). I include this photo for reasons other than my own doddering self-promotion. Take a look at my right hand’s position on the ball. We return to this image shortly.

Figure 2. Taking on the Brits!
(Keep the right hand in mind.)

Before a game in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, the host team presented us with a fancy banner and a succulent melon. I had recently formed the team, and this game was our first contest in a foreign port. Thus, we did not know the Chinese protocol was to begin the event by exchanging gifts. Ha. I can picture the two centers for Memphis and UCLA. Just before they face-off for the jump ball, they hand each other a cantaloupe. Play ball!

Anyway, I ad-libbed and gave the Taiwanese players our basketball as our goodwill gift. The gesture was pretty pathetic. I suspect the ball was made in Taiwan.

Drop the curtain. In my older years, before taking-on the treadmill in the local gym, I shoot baskets for a few minutes. Jump shots are no longer in my repertoire, and I no longer play in competition. I’ve too many friends of my age who have busted Achilles tendons because they stayed on the court too long. But it does not matter. At 7 AM on the Ironwood Athletic Club court, no one else is around but an addled basketball player. I can dribble to my heart’s content. An occasional swish through the basket from the 3-point circle makes my day.

Life is good up here in North Idaho. ...And our Idaho Vodka is made *solely* from potatoes...not that inferior grain stuff.

A Fast Game. A Game of Flow

I've always thought of basketball as being a fast-paced game; an exciting contest requiring continuous action on the part of the players; an engagement requiring strength, coordination, and stamina. One in which the skill of dribbling and passing are arts unto themselves.

During the UCLA/Memphis game, it began to sink into my aging grey matter that the game had changed since I played it in my youth. But why had I not noticed the transformations before? The game has been changing for many years. True, but for me, I have had my nose in other matters. I still consider myself a cultural illiterate from having spent so much time in computer network manuals. Anyway, here are some observations about the current game of basketball.

“Palming” the ball. For many years, a player was required to dribble the basketball by placing his hand onto the top of the ball, and push it downward toward the hardwood. This rule placed a significant limit on the player's ability to change direction and move around the court.

The rule confined a talented player to making only semi-sensational moves in his drive to the basket. Granted, semi-sensational moves sold tickets. Just watch films of Bob Cousy. But eliminate the “semi” and you end-up with more ticket sales. Just watch films of Michael Jordon. No wonder his Air-Highness moved around the court as he did. He palmed the ball.

Take another look at Figure 2. My right hand is underneath the ball. This action was permitted because I had stopped my dribble and was lifting the ball to make a shot for the basket. But if I were still dribbling, I would have been called for “shoveling” or “palming,” and ball possession would have been given to the opponent.

The acceptance into the game of palming has changed the nature of the game. It has made it much easier to dribble and to score. It started in the pros, and has percolated down into the college ranks. I've not seen a high school game recently, but I suspect palming is now allowed there as well.

Two steps then shoot. One of the moves that struck me as weird was the ball handler taking two steps, planting both feet, *stopping* and then jumping and shooting. Think of it this way: The act consists of two non-contiguous motions: (1) two steps, with the second step onto a two-footed stance; followed by (b) a two-footed leap toward a shot to the basket.

As I recall, it makes no sense in the context of the original game. The game was meant to be one of continual flow. Some basketball fans up here in Idaho informed me the rules were changed several years ago to allow this sort of discontinuous shot. Am I being a spoil-sport? Maybe. But the movement seems so contrived, so awkward in the context of how I view the game and how I played it for most of my life.

But I could be wrong about this image. It may be that this action has always been permitted. I look forward to your views.

Commercials

I don't mind commercials if they are presented with some semblance of balance to the program they sponsor. But there is a limit. Part of my problem with this subject was the fact that I was watching the NCAA play-off game with dog Milli, and not wife Holly.

Milli is a disinterested hoops fan, and had little to contribute during the breaks. Thus, your reporter was left to himself, while CBS managed to subvert a beautiful game---one in which continual flow is part of its essence---into a fragmented, ad-laden, inane parody of the sport.

So, taking off my UNM Lobos hat, and putting-on my curmudgeon cap, I turned on the TV once again to watch how the media would mangle the North Carolina/Kansas game.

Again, am I just being a poor sport? In my defense, no. Take the Masters Golf Tournament. The sponsor announces it will restrict its advertisements during play; that the number of commercials will be limited. And the sponsor delivers! The sponsor is Cadillac, and I so respect this approach--and its respect for the contest under way---that I make it a point to *actually watch the advertisements*.

Even more, because of the respect the advertiser has for the viewer and the event, when I was shopping for a car, I went out of my way to visit the local Cadillac dealer. I did not buy a Cadillac, but I gave it a go. All because of the manner in which this firm advertised its product.

Cut to the Chase

As we speak, I am watching the pre-game activities of the North Carolina/Kansas game. They are introducing the players:

- North Carolina has no starter from North Carolina. They come from Virginia, California, Missouri, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The idea of cheering for a *home* college team is as silly as cheering for a *home* pro team. You don't agree? See Baltimore Colts, now in Indianapolis. See the Oakland, the Anaheim...eh once again the Oakland Raiders.
- Kansas has a starting guard from Alaska. Wow is that home team or what?!
- I don't mean to be a sour apple in the barrel, but I would like to humbly offer that cheering for a team whose players (a) don't know you, (b) care less if they do, (c) are playing for themselves and their own self-interests does not make much sense.

To the game itself:

First Half: Kansas vs. North Carolina.
(For the uninitiated, each half is 20 minutes.)

First Commercial Break. Clock: 15:43.

Milli and I watched an action-packed 4 minutes, 57 seconds, suddenly interrupted with Jim Nance saying here's our "first break." Which gave way to 2 minutes, 30 seconds of advertisements.

Second Commercial Break. Clock: 11:30.

We watched 4 minutes, 13 seconds of basketball, then again interrupted with the "second break." Another 2 minutes, 30 seconds of advertisements.

Third Commercial Break. Clock: 7:32.

3 minutes, 58 seconds of basketball, followed by the "third break." Another 2 minutes, 30 seconds of advertisements.

Unscheduled Break. What Luck! An Injury: Fourth Commercial Break; First Injury Break. Clock: 7:17.

An injury! It did not matter that the injured player might have needed, say, a minute or so of treatment...or an hour or so. Another 2 minutes, 30 seconds of advertisements.

Fifth Commercial Break. Clock: 3:21.

Another 2 minutes, 30 seconds of advertisements.

Sixth Commercial Break. Clock: 2:27.

This break lasted only 30 seconds with an AT&T advertisement. It might have been a time-out for the referees to do their referee things, or for the floor cleaners to do their floor cleaner things. Whatever the cause for cessation of basketball play, play a commercial!

As best I could tell, none of the breaks in the first half came from the coaches calling a time out. Why bother? CBS was providing more than enough time for the teams to plot their strategy and for the players to rest. Anyway, I counted 20 minutes of play and 13 minutes of commercials.

What were the fans in the stands doing in the meantime? Watching good-looking cheerleaders. Okay, maybe the timeouts aren't so bad. But sitting in front of a TV? The final four was the final draw for me. No more basketball on TV. I'll head down the street and watch my local high school team.