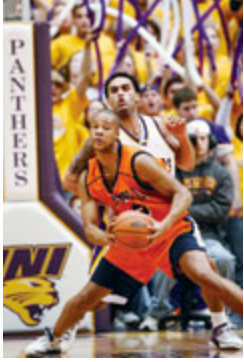


## Hot dogs and underdogs



CEDAR FALLS, IOWA, --- One minute remained in double-overtime of the men's college basketball game between Bucknell and the University of Northern Iowa Panthers. A referee whistled time-out. Both teams huddled on their respective benches and the UNI Dome loudspeakers pounded out the first few guitar licks of the AC/DC rock anthem, "Thunderstruck."

Eight thousand hostile Northern Iowa fans roared. The dome's cavernous walls shuddered. Bleachers shook. Backboards vibrated. And though I couldn't prove it, I was sure the ESPN cameras trembled.

Seated behind the Bucknell bench and away from the safety of the visitor's section, stood two sign-waving Bucknell alums. From across the court, they looked like two orange crayons in a sea of purple grapes.

This was an ESPN "Bracketbuster" game, and the headline event for a made-for-television slate of games between the nation's top mid-major teams. These are the underdogs who knock off the big programs come tourney-time. The Davids who dunk on Goliath. Teams like Bucknell.

I was so tense I had to remind myself to breathe. But were the other two hundred Bucknell fans at the game intimidated by the crowd and AC/DC?

That's a silly question.

The initial response to the high, needling guitar riff and the Northern Iowa cheers was lead by eight Bucknell undergraduates known as the "Sojka Psychos." (You know the type: Shirtless. Each with a letter painted on his bare chest to spell B-U-C-K-N-E-L-L. Mom's proud.)

"We can't hear you!" shouted the Psychos and a dozen fans near them.

"THUNDER!" growled the dome speakers.

"WE CAN'T HEAR YOU!" retorted the Psychos, fifty alumni and a six-year old blonde girl waving an orange and blue Bison sign.

"THUNDER!!!"

"WE CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

The chant erupted from a sea of orange. The band was into it. President Brian C. Mitchell, sitting behind the Psychos, was into it. His wife, Maryjane, was way into it. All the polite, respectable folk that represent the fine and upstanding institution that is Bucknell were into it. I was waving an orange Bucknell baseball cap at no one in particular and dancing on one leg for reasons I have difficulty explaining. But I didn't care because outside the Iowa winter temperatures were sub-sub-zero (twenty-five below with the wind chill) and it was much more fun inside where we could argue with a loudspeaker and root for our team.

Bucknell has an entire alumni road show following the games. If Bucknell's men's basketball team is playing near you, the chances are good that you will be surrounded by blue and orange, that the upper echelon of the university administration will be in attendance, that there will be good food and...hats.

Yes. Hats. Excellent, top-quality baseball hats. I was excited about the hat. It is a nice hat. (For a game against Holy Cross, Bucknell gave away 350 hats and had to turn away hundreds.)

After grabbing my hat, I chatted with President Mitchell who said that after the NCAA tournament victory over Kansas, the university's applicant pool increased by between seven and eight hundred applications. Median SAT scores continue to climb as well and are now in the stratospheric mid-1300 range.

Attendance at basketball games is increasing as well. Said Mitchell, "Some people said we'd never sell out Sojka Pavilion, but we've already had seven sellouts so far this year."

A few minutes later, I met Brian McGlinchey. Remember the two guys wearing Bucknell orange in a sea of purple? That's McGlinchey and fellow '89 alum Forrest Chilton.

After Bucknell's NCAA tournament appearance in 1989, McGlinchey promised himself he would have perfect attendance at all Bucknell NCAA tournament games. He had to wait awhile for the next appearance but this year, traveling with Chilton and George Lampl ('89), he has averaged one

Bucknell basketball game a month--which is impressive for a guy who lives in San Antonio, Texas. When McGlinchey can't watch the Bison in person, he streams their free radio broadcasts via BucknellBison.com, or he pays \$7.50 per game for online video streaming.

McGlinchey, Chilton and Lampl are part of the curious connection between Bucknell and Northern Iowa. In last year's NCAA tournament, Bucknell's pep band was unable to make the trip so the Bucknell alums printed Bucknell t-shirts and acquired the sheet music that helped convert the Northern Iowa's men's basketball team into a Bucknell band after the Panther's first round loss to the University of Wisconsin. In a show of appreciation at the Bracketbuster game, Bucknell's band wore Northern Iowa hats and played the Panther's fight song as Northern Iowa took the court at the start of the second half.

As the game clock wound down, the niceties of halftime seemed like a long time ago.

The defenses locked down. Chris McNaughton knocked in a sweeping hook shot reminiscent of the one he buried over Wayne Simien in the Kansas game. Kevin Bettencourt beat the shot clock with a three-pointer so long and with such arc he might as well have been shooting over Rooke Chapel. Charles Lee continued to attack, but Northern Iowa hadn't folded. They converted two last-second shots to force both overtimes.

In the end, the game didn't go as hoped for the Bison. After twelve wins in a row and an appearance in the national rankings for the first time in school history, they fell in double-overtime to a team that will return to the national polls after the game. Final score: 65-61.

The fans filed out. Shrugs were exchanged. The Bucknell band struck up a sad tune.

I consoled myself with the thought that this was a tough game, but a fun experience -- and that next year, Northern Iowa has to travel to Lewisburg.

Now that we're past March Madness, that loss seems distant, but also instructive. The Northern Iowa game was the last loss for the Bison before their season came to a close against the #1 seeded University of Memphis Tigers in the second round of the NCAA tournament.

In between, came six straight wins, the capping of a perfect Patriot League season, a Patriot League tournament championship and a first-round NCAA tournament victory over Arkansas.

Call it gaining a sense of perspective but, in the 2005-6 season, the Bison accomplished the following:

-- Set both school and conference records for victories, with a record of 27-5. -- Became the first team in Patriot League history with an undefeated season (14-0). -- Won the Patriot League Tournament for the second year in a row. -- Received a best-ever No. 9 seed in the NCAA tournament.

-- Won a first-round game for the second year in a row (59-55 over Arkansas).

-- Ended the season ranked #25 in the ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll, compiled after the close of the NCAA tournament.

-- Won the 2006 Hugh Durham Award for Mid-Major Coach of the Year for Coach Pat Flannery. And, finally, there was the accomplishment that matters most. In the 2005-6 NCAA Tournament field, Bucknell was the only school with a perfect graduation record.

So, yes, As with the loss to Northern Iowa, I was sad when the Bison's season ended against the Tigers but shortly thereafter, my thoughts turned to next season and I reminded myself of what McGlinchey says to friends who are debating whether or not to make a trip to see the Bison play.

"What if they win, and you're not there?"

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