

# Basketball

## ■ ESPN BRACKETBUSTER

# Efforts of 'Sojka Psychos' not quite enough

By Steve McNutt  
For The Daily Item

CEDAR FALLS, IOWA — Three weeks ago, ESPN announced that Bucknell University would play the University of Northern Iowa in a special Bracketbuster game.

Andy Kummer, a Bucknell student due to graduate in 2008, knew there was no place he would rather be: in Cedar Falls, Iowa, watching the Bison, shirtless, a letter "K" painted on his chest.

Outside the dome, the wind chill made it feel like 25 degrees below zero. Remember, Kummer was shirtless.

He could not have been happier.

"He just dominates the post!" screamed Corey Curnutte, also a member of the Class of 2008, his chest covered in a blue "C," as Bucknell center Chris McNaughton scored a layup a few minutes in. It was early in the game, their team had just scored and an ESPN cameraman kept directing a lens their way. Orange-shirted elementary-aged girls approached the students — whose chests spelled out the full B-U-C-K-N-E-L-L down the row of seats — and asked to have their pictures taken with them.

The group of eight "Sojka Psychos" knew their place. Everyone was needed. Almost as much as their team needed DE-FENSE right about then.

The game didn't go the way the Psychos, or the other two hundred Bucknell fans in attendance, wanted as the Bison fell in double overtime



Photo provided

From left, Dan Shuman, Andrew Loin, Corey Curnutte, Andy Kummer, and Joe Mellott traveled to Cedar Falls, Iowa, to watch No. 24 Bucknell play unranked Northern Iowa. Their cheers weren't enough, as the Bison lost 66-65 in double overtime.

to Northern Iowa by a score of 65-61.

Bucknell led for much of the game.

Donald Brown crushed home an alley-oop. Charles Lee hit well-timed threes. Chris McNaughton scored on a sweeping hook shot reminiscent of the shot he hit over Wayne Simien in last year's NCAA tournament victory over Kansas.

With two seconds left on the shot clock at the end of regulation, Kevin Bettencourt nailed a 25-foot 3-pointer. It seemed like the game-clincher. It wasn't.

In a game matching two teams running disciplined, half-court offenses, it came down to jump shots and Bucknell, all too often, was

off the mark.

Analysis: too many misses. Too many big UNI inside players scoring on easy layups.

Basketball is a game of strange bounces and heart-break. Every time my favorite team wins, I will argue it's the greatest game ever invented. Every time they lose, I promise myself I will stop watching and stop caring.

Why should we worry about the fan?

Think about the Psychos. These guys are real. They left Lewisburg on Friday afternoon and drove 14 hours straight to Cedar Falls. Eight guys in two cars. (One hopes the windows were rolled down.) They survived the drudgery of the road by duct-

taping a television between the driver and passenger seats so they could play video games in the wee hours. The rules of the fan who follows the team are simple: Coffee is your friend. The referees are your enemies.

The team gets a charter flight home, but what's waiting for you? Fourteen hours of wiping U's drool off the seat belt and begging K to give you a little more leg room. And to roll down the window. Not a pretty scene.

That's what it means to be a fan. No one asks you to shoot, pass or dribble. You don't decide the defense.

You just live with the results. (And given the state of my jump shot, that's probably a fair trade.) If our knees start to hurt, the team still wins. Tomorrow is always there.

Somewhere, as I write these words, eight guys are on I-80 and have the better part of 900 miles in front of them on the way back to Lewisburg. There are too many fast-food wrappers at their feet. Flecks of face paint on the rearview mirror. Someone has a paper due.

So, please, hold a little space in your heart for the disappointed sports fanatic.

It's rough business being a fan, but I hope that by the time the Psychos see signs for Highway 15, they'll remember that the season never really ends. For the fan, there's always another game.

■ Steve McNutt is a writer, artist and graduate of Bucknell University. He lives and works in Iowa City, Iowa.