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Mitch Henck: Throwback Wisconsin Badgers team delivers magical ride

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How sweet it is. Our beloved Wisconsin Badgers are headed back to the Final Four in Indianapolis, the place where the movie “Hoosiers” was filmed.

UW Band Director Mike Leckrone was in the seats that day in 1954 when tiny Milan High School derailed mighty Muncie Central to win the state. The Milan miracle preserved the one-class system in the Indiana high school tournament until 1997.

Growing up in Indiana, I’ve always considered March sacred. Sitting in Chicago with my daughter two weeks ago, I was shaking when the Badgers stormed back from down 11 late to beat Michigan State. I had not been that deeply thrilled at a basketball game since the high school tournament 40 years ago back home in Indiana.

The NCAA tournament is the most dramatic event in major sports. It is the only place where schools such as Northern Iowa or Georgia State can dance on the same stage as Duke and Kentucky. Images of the Milan miracle came back to life when a school such as Mercer shocked Duke last year or when tiny Butler advanced to two straight championship games in 2010 and 2011.

This year it was a thrill to watch 14 seed Georgia State stun 3rd seed Baylor on a 23-foot shot by R.J. Hunter. The joy of that game winner was that his dad and Georgia State coach Ron Hunter fell out of his rolling chair when he reacted to the shot. Coach was in the chair because he tore his Achilles tendon while celebrating his team’s bid to the Big Dance.

The story lines are endless. Old hand UCLA climbed back to the second weekend thanks to a miracle upset of 74-year old Coach Larry Brown and his SMU team. UCLA Coach Steve Alford grew up in Martinsville, Indiana, also home of the legendary John Wooden and where Wooden won the state title in 1927. In fact, John Dillinger once robbed a bank in Martinsville because all the police were in the gym watching Wooden's team play.

The Badgers are a throwback to a more innocent time. Star center Frank Kaminsky could have gone pro last year but didn't want to miss this. Wisconsin does not have one-and-done players such as at Kentucky or Duke. In fact, the Badgers were in class Monday morning after playing the late game in Omaha the night before.

Some Badgers may succeed for years in the pros, but that will be work. Nothing will ever beat the fun they're having now. Memories of this special team will stay with them, and their popularity will be maintained for the rest of their lives.

That truth was shared with me by the late Bernie Flowers, a first team All-American tight end at Purdue in 1952. Bernie told me years ago, "Mitchie, nobody remembers all-pro, but everybody remembers All-American."

I hope you can make the trip to Indy next week. The Final Four is worth absorbing, even if you don't go to the games. All the Division I coaches stay in the Hyatt Hotel. Former coaches such as Jud Heathcote (Michigan State) and Rollie Massamino (Villanova) stand in the lobby to be seen and talk to you. Basketball junkies like me feel like we're 12. So let us allow ourselves to be young again and enjoy the thrill of this magical Badgers journey.