

BUTLER'S BIG DANCE

THE TEAM,
THE TOURNAMENT,
AND BASKETBALL FEVER



SUSAN S. NEVILLE

FOREWORD BY BOBBY FONG

BIG DANCE

The Team, the Tournament, and Basketball Fever



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BUTLER'S

SUSAN S. NEVILLE Foreword by **BOBBY FONG**

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For my father,
JOHN F. SCHAEFER,
Butler class of 1949

To add a page or two
For Butler's fighting crew
Beneath the Hoosier sky.

—FROM "THE BUTLER WAR SONG"



Is that dance slowing in the mind of man?
That made him think the universe could hum?

—FROM "THE DANCE" BY THEODORE ROETHKE

FOREWORD

Sports are the front porch to a university. In the course of the 2010 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, Butler University's front porch was crowded. The team entered tournament play with a 28–4 record, including an 18–0 mark in conference play and a championship in the post-season Horizon League Tournament. The Bulldogs, representing a university of 4,500 students, then proceeded to advance to the Sweet Sixteen with wins against University of Texas El Paso and Murray State, to the Final Four with upsets of Syracuse and Kansas State, and to the Championship Game with a victory over favored Michigan State. The team rode a 25-game winning streak into the final against Duke, and the David-vs.-Goliath plot made for a compelling sports story.

But there was more. The Final Four was held in Butler's hometown of Indianapolis, and this enabled the team to attend classes through the week and even on the day of the Championship Game. The men's basketball program had six Academic All-Americans in the last four years, the most basketball players honored of any university, including two on this year's team: Matt Howard and Gordon Hayward. The program not only had high graduation rates among its players, the athletes majored in engineering, math, finance, and education. They were true students, and season practices took place at 6:30 in the morning to accommodate class schedules. People on the front porch looked through the windows of the university in admiration of its academic seriousness.

Susan Neville's book invites you inside the university to share its excitement during this run. She tells the stories and captures the voices of the Butler community, faculty, staff, students, fans, and the team itself. Butler basketball is rooted in a comprehensive campus commitment to excellence in all of our endeavors. Our educational mission is to prepare each graduate not simply to make a living but to make a life of purpose, in which individual flourishing is intertwined with the welfare of others.

May Susan's book help you to experience the heady days of 2010 March Madness at Butler University. I hope it also gives you a sense of the ongoing ethos of our school, which invites you to visit our porch and step through our doors.

BOBBY FONG

President, Butler University

PREFACE

On Joy



This is a book about Butler University's campus and community during the 2010 NCAA men's basketball championship run, and through that lens, it's a book about Indiana's basketball fever and perhaps a book about our longing for heroes. I will try very hard to stay out of this book's way.

It's also a book about joy, that kind of surprising joy that comes in the middle of dailiness, like one of those moments when you look up at the sky and see—out-of nowhere—a multicolored hot air balloon and you give it all your attention and unexpectedly it lifts your heart. It touches something hidden. Where did it come from, you wonder, and why does it touch you so deeply? Beauty does that when it's surprising: an unexpected turn in a poem, the shock of unearned love, the knowledge that human beings can make something good in this world where we make so much that's bad. The knowledge, too, that it's all so ephemeral.

Since everyone I've talked to has asked "why are you writing this book?" (with different emphasis—sometimes on the "why," sometimes on the "you," and sometimes on the "this") and no one seems to be satisfied with any answer I can give, a confession:

Four-year-old Amelia, the girl who lives next door to me, is one of those little girls who always wears dresses. Both her parents are full-time physicians, and her mother lives in hospital scrubs. Her babysitters are young women dressed in the usual jeans and T-shirts, and Amelia has both alternatives to the wardrobe she's chosen and the models for wearing them.

But the dresses are her choice. And the pastel socks she wears with them. She will dress like this, no doubt, until she goes to school and begins dressing the same as her classmates.

Amelia loves baby dolls and the smell of their perfect vinyl skin and the petals of their eyes. She loves pink flowered fabrics and she wears her hair long and curly with barrettes. But none of that holds her back. Her knees are skinned, she flips upside down on the swing set, and she goes so high when

she swings on the tree swing that if she were to choose to jump off she would have to grow wings or risk several broken limbs.

When I see Amelia outside running through the grass with her older brother Walker, I think more of a nineteenth-century farm girl working the fields in cotton dresses and reading books by candlelight than I do of, say, a heavily made-up little girl from a beauty pageant. I think of a girl who knows her own mind. Amelia is one of those little girls who loves the feel of the wind on her legs, who loves to twirl in a skirt, who loves the word “pretty.” *Why do you always wear a dress?* someone will soon say to her. I know this, or rather I’m imagining it, because this is what people said to me when I was her age. Even then.

So that’s why I feel the need to preface this sports book with a confession. Or rather several.

The first I’ve already implied. My childhood was like Amelia’s. I spent my childhood in the world of the prescribed feminine. At some level I knew I had a choice. At some level I felt I might not. That was the era I grew up in. I sewed. I played with dolls. I read Nancy Drew books and Jane Austen, and I’ve never been an athlete. I don’t have a single gift in that direction.

My son played football and baseball through high school. If the weather’s nice or there are fireworks, I can watch baseball, but I could never even keep my eye on where my own son was when the movement started on the field in football. My daughter played soccer and softball. I envy her strength and power. My son can throw a spiral harder and farther than anyone short of a professional quarterback. My daughter spent two months in Haiti in 2010, busting rubble with a sledgehammer and pushing the heavy rock in wheelbarrows for the Canadian army to cart away to a landfill. Forgive a mother’s pride.

I couldn’t lift a sledgehammer. And I went to both my children’s games and always brought a book to read. I learned to hide it the way my students hide their instant messaging during classes.

I grew up around men and a few great-aunts talking almost exclusively, and animatedly, about sports. I saw how it bonded them, and I never felt left out. Relieved is more like it. It gave me the space and the freedom to read and write, to think my own thoughts and, as well, to observe pure attention and joy in those I loved. I love, too, how girls who play soccer and basketball in high school seem insulated against some of the craziness of adolescence. I love their muscles and confidence and ferocity, and I love the competitive spirit my

women students have, a spirit I think they had less access to when I started teaching. I attribute it to sports. I do.

But until I started writing this book, I never read the sports page. I never participated in the game or in the conversation. I have felt as though it were another language. It was a language I had no facility with or the slightest wish to learn.

And while I'm at it, I might as well say that I absolutely loathe Lucas Oil stadium, the offstage but ever-present setting of much of this story. Lucas Oil has the look of a fieldhouse, but it's not the real thing. It's entirely out of human scale. It hulks. It looms. You can see it from space. I expect it to grow legs at midnight some Halloween and start walking around, like Godzilla, crushing all our churches and schools and museums and sidewalks and our libraries and our trees and flowers and our loved ones into tiny pieces.

Peyton Manning is just fine with me, as were the Edge and Pierre Garcon. All the Colts are just fine with me, in fact. It was cool when we won the Super Bowl. I loved Tony Dungy. But I hate that cathedral we built for them. I doubt that it was built to last for centuries.

Basketball? Well, basketball is another thing entirely.

I was born and grew up in Indiana, and while I don't feel the moves kinetically the way I feel the keys of a typewriter or piano or the strings of a violin or the pages of a book, the language of basketball and the rhythm of the season and the way basketball is woven into the culture are entirely familiar to me.

I know the feel and heft and the color and the taste of a basketball. I know the metallic sound it makes on the asphalt, a different sound than it makes on hardwood. I know the heroic names. *Bobby Plump*. *Isiah Thomas*. *The Van Arsdale*. *Billy Shepherd*. *Larry Bird*. *Oscar Robertson*. *John Wooden*. *Tony Hinkle*. Even *Bobby Knight*. I went to Butler basketball games in Hinkle Fieldhouse when I was a child. I remember the excitement of the IHSAA boys' basketball tourney, and I attended more sectional and regional and semi-state championships at Hinkle than I can count.

I lived in New Castle, Indiana, when all-American Steve Alford was playing ball in the world's largest high school gymnasium. In fact, of the twelve largest high school gyms in the country all but two of them are in Indiana. Four of those are in the Gary/Elkhart region and most of the others are in the former industrial centers of Anderson, Muncie, Richmond, and New Castle. Large but in scale with the community, they are buildings draped around the

true spirit of a place. They mean something to generations. They smell like popcorn and sneakers. They're the pattern for what the large professional stadiums are gesturing toward.

Those years watching high school basketball and then the following years when Indiana University won the national championship taught me about Hoosier hysteria, the whole madness and joy of it.

In New Castle, we lived for Friday and Saturday nights. Kids growing up in Henry County would always, they thought, wear green, and they would always be New Castle Trojans even if they moved to another school district in some holy disaster their parents might visit upon them.

The team was their greatest loyalty, the thing that bound them to their community and to generations of their own families. It was culture-making and perhaps even soul-making. It was, more than anything, community-building in a place that had very little going for it economically.

On Friday nights everyone in the town, a town in the middle of incredible economic bust going back to the middle of the twentieth century, was drawn together in the fieldhouse. Had a fight with your husband or feel distant from your kids or your parents or worried about your job or your falling-down house or your money? Whatever it was, during the game itself you let it all out. The primal scream, the ecstatic release, the sorrow and the joy and the frustrations, all of it let loose in watching the boys who were part of you, the best part of you, and whether they won or lost and, even more important, *how* they won or lost was part of you. There were rituals and people playing their roles—popcorn vendor, parent of a player, parent of a player's girlfriend, sister of a friend of a friend, neighbor, and so on—and the whole thing was as cathartic and spiritual as religion and art are supposed to be but often aren't. So I suppose that was a confession too.

At the end of the game you hugged strangers who were no longer strangers. You made up with your spouse or children. And then you talked about the game over breakfast on Saturday. You recalled players who had been dead for years, their signature moves on the court. You talked about ones who were coming up and would soon be playing for you. Myths were created. Steve Alford, it was said, would start every single day shooting free throws and he wouldn't stop until he'd sunk a hundred straight. If he reached 99 and missed the 100th shot, he would begin again at the beginning.

It's not that different, finally, from the repetitive nature of the assembly line at the Chrysler plant where you work, or the fields you plow or the cars streaming by your window at the drive-through. The basketball players lift all

that tedium for you and give it to the gods as an offering. Odysseus began his career like that, you know. He was a farmer.

My friend the writer Barb Shoup grew up in Hammond, Indiana. She remembers a woman who had on a vinyl LP the radio broadcast of the game when East Chicago Washington High School won the state championship. Throughout her life, she played the record as she cleaned the house and the joy still lifted her beyond the drudgery.

I understand that. After living in New Castle for five years, we named our firstborn Steven. That's how much I have loved amateur basketball.

But I have never in all my years seen or felt anything quite like the Butler University campus the spring our men's basketball team made it to the Final Four at Lucas Oil Stadium and missed winning the national championship by two points.

As an Indiana writer, Hoosier hysteria has always fascinated me. Why basketball? Why Indiana? And what, finally, is the hysteria? Why does basketball seem to generate such loyalty and such mythology? And what does it feel like when you're a fan caught inside the storm?

When asked to recall their favorite memories about the tournament, most of the 600-some respondents to a Butler survey used words like *electric* and *surreal*. Almost all said they hoped they would never forget what it felt like. When the student journalists who covered the game were called by their counterparts at other schools the primary question was "What is it like on campus?"

And what could you say? It was like nothing else. The story of the 2010 NCAA men's basketball championship season and of the final championship game pitting Butler against Duke a few miles away from their home court in Indianapolis is a mythopoeic story. The book about the games, the schools, the players and strategies will be written. It will be filled with statistics and analysis and stories remembered through the fog of time and distance. And I will read that book and I will keep it on my bookshelf, and I hope it's a good book. What I would like to get at here is what it felt like to be an alum or a parent or, as time went on, a neighbor or a member of the community. The story of the small school making its way through the tournament was both universal and particularly Hoosier, and it happened at a time when perhaps the country itself needed the story.


What I would like to capture right now—because it's rare and ephemeral (even now changing, being revised, being calcified into history)—was the way the tournament was a center of energy that caused a small community

to feel glittery and surreal and important and oddly, at times, almost disconnected from reality.

It's the way it probably felt in Milan, Indiana, in 1954 when a school of 161 students won the state basketball championship by Bobby Plump's two points against Muncie Central and 40,000 people showed up to celebrate the win. It was like the moment East Chicago Washington gave a housewife in Hammond a gift, or like moments during the summer that huge glittery comet Hale-Bopp hung so quietly in the skies, bringing our attention back to it over and over as something miraculous. And then forgotten.

Any work of art, any culturally made artifact in this world, is an attempt, as Willa Cather wrote, to "make a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose." So here's an attempt—a few words, some interviews, some quotations, some images—to catch that time in a bottle, that lightning in a jar—before it fades into history.

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