

**Puppy love**

Why a recent dog story found a soft spot with many — Page 15

Daily Herald

True tourney fans

Seen the Final Four 45 times? Then this group's for you — Sports



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'Hoop Historians'

**Today's national semifinals**

At The Alamodome in San Antonio
TV: Channel 2

- Memphis (37-1) vs. UCLA (35-3), 5:07 p.m.
- North Carolina (36-2) vs. Kansas (35-3), 40 minutes following



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Here are four Hoop Historians: from left to right, Ted Reineking of Schaumburg, Fred Allman of Addison, Joe Spagnolo of Lombard and Brian Burmeister of Geneva. They met in Burmeister's basement before heading to the Final Four in San Antonio.



Chicago-based group meets every year at the Final Four

BY LINDSEY WILLHITE

Like many newlyweds in the mid-1970s, Geneva's Brian and Linda Burmeister had to ration nickels just like everyone rationed gasoline. "We didn't have much money" Linda said. So on the rare occasions when they splurged, the Burmeisters made sure to do so on the important things. Like college basketball. One night in early 1975, they sat down to dinner, and here's what Linda served one Brian's platter: One round-trip ticket to San Diego for the Final Four. If Brian didn't already know he had picked a winner in Linda, then her gift sealed the deal.

For Brian, a nonpareil UCLA fan and longtime friend of John Wooden, that trip to San Diego still ranks as his favorite in a lifelong addiction to college hoops. For starters the Bruins captured their 10th NCAA title in 12 years. Along the way UCLA edged Louisville (coached by Wooden protégé Denny Crum) 75-74 in an overtime semifinal. "That was the best game I ever saw" Brian said. Secondly, Wooden revealed after the Louisville thriller that the ensuing championship game would be his final game at UCLA. So Burmeister got to be in the stands when Wooden wrapped up his incredible coaching career with a 92-85 win over Kentucky.

Then thanks to a chance invitation, he and a buddy had the opportunity to attend the teams' postgame celebration at their ocean-side hotel. "We got to see [Coach] Wooden actually dance with his wife Nell at the party" said Burmeister, the wonder still evident in his voice. There's one other way Linda's gift continues to give to her husband: It enabled him to keep his Final Four streak alive. When Brian settles into his Alamodome seat for today's semifinal game between UCLA and Memphis — wracked with a typical fan's worry that Derrick Rose and his Tigers might be too much for his Bruins — he'll be attending his 42nd consecutive Final Four and 45th overall. But if you think he's the only suburban resident who's certifiable about college basketball, then you need to meet the rest of the Hoop Historians.

The Historians, a 22-person group that has members from coast-to-coast but claims Chicago as its base, meet every year at the Final Four to “share their past experiences, renew old acquaintances and meet new ones, and continue to promote the game through education and goodwill”.

Joe Spagnolo, 46, a Lombard resident, pens the monthly newsletter and runs the group’s website (www.hoophistorians.com). During the school year he gets his helping of hoops by running the Proviso West Holiday Tournament, officiating other high school games and working DePaul’s scorer’s table. But when March comes it’s all about college hoops. He attended his first Final Four in 1992 where he discovered the beauty of corporate hospitality. “I never had to buy a thing to eat all weekend” Spagnolo said, “I said, ‘Gosh. I’ve got to do this all the time’”.

San Antonio marks Spagnolo’s 12th consecutive Final Four, but this year’s March Madness, as it usually does, starts well before the finals. This year Spagnolo, Schaumburg’s Ted Reineking, Addison’s Fred Allman and Chicago’s Bruce Ziemer flew to Anaheim for the opening round games. But because that wasn’t enough basketball they flew to Tempe, Arizona last weekend for the West regional finals. (Allman, an incurable Cubs fan, made sure to check out some Spring Training games as well). When you throw Final Four expenses on top of that, it might sound like too much NCAA hoops for one year.

But it probably wasn’t enough for the 63-year old Reineking. In 1992, when the NCAA placed subregionals in Cincinnati and Dayton, he and his buddies attended four first round games Thursday in Cincinnati. Then they drove to Dayton for four first-round games Friday. Then back to Cincinnati for two Saturday games in Cincinnati and back to Dayton for two Sunday games. No wonder the retired Reineking, who has worked the scorer’s table at DePaul for the last 30 years, can claim to have seen 239 NCAA Tournament games.

More importantly to his family’s pocketbook, he can claim he has never paid a scalper’s price to attend these games. How does he do it? “Call it creative marketing” Reineking says with a laugh. While he won’t divulge what that means, Allman explains the Historians credo. “We don’t want to pay it” he said of the scalpers’ markup “and we don’t want to make money on it. If we have extra tickets we sell them at face value”. The karmic attitude has served the Historians well over the years because they’re usually at the mercy of the NCAA lottery and the benevolence of others. “In 2005 at Saint Louis we won two sets of lottery tickets that happened to be right next to each other” Spagnolo said.

Only Burmeister, 67, considered to be the senior Historian, knows he’ll have a ticket each year. As a member of the National Association of Basketball Coaches since 1962, when he served as an unpaid assistant to Dick Triptow at Lake Forest College, he has annual access to a Final Four ticket along with some of the game’s greatest coaches. Which, in addition, to enabling Burmeister to get Hall of Famers to sign the posters that adorn his basement that highlights his memorabilia collection, leads to some weird stories that always seem to involve bathrooms. In 1994, when Arkansas won the title, Burmeister’s trip to the concession stand came as Hillary Rodham Clinton walked out of the bathroom. So he and Hillary chatted for 5-10 minutes. “I’m sure the Secret Service agents thought my hot dog was a gun” he said. Another year, Burmeister found himself in the seat next to former Kentucky coach Adolph Rupp. “He wasn’t in great health then” Burmeister said. “He asked me if I would help him to use the bathroom”. You think any other basketball nut can claim that anecdote as part of their mental memorabilia? Historic, indeed.

Hoop Historians share their favorite memories

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The Final Four site, fittingly, serves as the Hoop Historians' annual convention. There's a dinner Thursday night and a business meeting Sunday, but the *raison d'être* is always the Saturday semifinals and Monday night's NCAA title game.

With that in mind, here are the favorite Final Four memories for our local Historians:

Fred Allman, 45, Addison: "I would say having my first Final Four (1982) being the one where (Michael) Jordan hit the shot to win it.

"And then have him come to Chicago and have him be as great as he was here, and be able to tell kids at my school (DuJardin Elementary in Bloomingdale), 'I knew him before he was a star here.' I saw him hit a shot that they don't even know about.

"That was the first year CBS had the TV contract and (Ted Reineking and I) said while sitting there, 'What a way for CBS to start, having that game.' From the (Patrick) Ewing goaltends to Freddie Brown throwing the bad pass ..."

Brian Burmeister, 67, Geneva: "1975 was (John) Wooden's last championship. We got invited to go to the post-championship party and Wooden had already decided he wasn't going to return.

"And then the next morning, I had my close (Warren High School) friend with me, who has since died of cancer. Wooden spoke with us for about a half-hour about his decision to retire and one thing and another.

"They were packing up and getting ready to head back to L.A. It was a nice, sunny day and we're just talking outside."

Ted Reineking, 63, Schaumburg: "Many thoughts and many highlights, but I think my all-time highlight is 1985 in Lexington, Kentucky.

"I did not have tickets, but a friend of mine had a telecopier business and said, 'If you help me in the media room, you'll be able to watch the games from the hallway.'

"On Saturday, I helped him out a lot. But for the title game, I sat in the third row of the press section behind the Villanova bench.

"Probably my greatest seat at a Final Four and I got totally emotionally involved in that game to see the incredible upset Villanova pulled on Georgetown. Playing the perfect game.

"And to see Harold Jensen knock down a long jumper and Georgetown calls timeout. And Jensen came over to their little trainer (Jake Nevin) and he tapped him on the head and said, 'We did it for you.' I'll never forget that as long as I live."

(Editor's note: Nevin, who suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease, died eight months after Villanova's win. The school renamed its field house in his honor).

Joe Spagnolo, 46, Lombard: "1992 was my first Final Four. I drive up to Minneapolis. I get a ticket from one of our (Proviso West) assistant coaches, 20 rows up from the court. Best seat I've ever had.

"I never had to buy a thing to eat all weekend. I always found hospitality rooms and people who knew people. I said, 'Gosh, I've got to do this all the time.' "