

MEMORIES FOR A LIFETIME

By Emily Giffin

Since I was nine years old I have wanted to be a manager for an Atlantic Coast Conference basketball team. It all began during the Ralph Sampson era when my uncle was then the Sports Information Director at Virginia. He introduced me to the fervor of college basketball, and Sampson, Ricky Stokes, Jimmy Miller and the rest of the Cavaliers became my childhood idols. I obsessed over that team, and when they were winning, my world was harmonious.

I remember studying the student manager, Wendy George, in the Virginia media guide, proclaiming her one of the luckiest people alive and vowing that I would someday have her job. She was a symbol to me of future possibilities — the dream of glimpsing the inside world of college basketball.

Throughout the next decade, I knew that I would attend a school in the ACC. Never did I consider going elsewhere, although I live in the heart of the Big Ten. The fall of my senior year, I visited Wake Forest, recognizing its fine academic reputation but consumed with thoughts of basketball.

In the Greensboro Airport, on my way back to Chicago, I spotted Coach Stokes with a recruit. It was the first time I had seen any player from the beloved Virginia team since I had gone to University Hall seven years earlier for Ralph Sampson's last home game. I interpreted this chance meeting as an omen to attend Wake Forest, and I asked Coach Stokes in the middle of the airport, before I had even been accepted to the school, if I could work with the team the following year. I pursued this initial contact and by October 15 of my freshman year, I was finally a manager in the ACC.

Some of the magical element the game held for me as a credulous third grader has remained during my years at Wake, captured by such things as Rodney's dazzling dunks or the dizzy anticipation as we wait for the NCAA pairings in the team locker room in mid-March. But in many ways, the glamour of college basketball has eroded, replaced by something more meaningful — lasting friendships and the feeling of satisfaction that only comes with total immersion in something you love.

I am now in my fourth and final season as a manager and the experience has meant more to me than I had ever imagined, even as a starry-eyed child fan. Working with the team is all-consuming and managing has colored my undergraduate years more than any other single dimension of college life.

Before parties, classes, or dorm life, I will remember my times with the team. Beating Duke four straight years and our brilliant 26-point win over Carolina last year are obvious highlights, memories for all of us. But even the little things

are firmly imprinted in my mind — like the bad acoustics and yellow glare of the gym and riding the antique elevator up to practice with gatorade, water and towels every afternoon and struggling across a dark, sleeping campus at 5 a.m. for early November practices. I will remember the lurching feeling during timeouts of close games, powdering rosin on outstretched palms.

I will remember the hollow silence on bus rides back from losses, half the team asleep, the others seeking refuge in the lull of their walkmen as well as the echo of celebration in the showers after big wins.

I will remember riding over to Joel Coliseum in the equipment van with the other managers and Sarge, waiting for him to exclaim, "Let's rock 'n' roll," hanging out in Scott Street's office while the guys changed after practice, and countless team dinners laughing with Kyle and Marc Blucas as we played our word association game.



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I will remember Coach Wainwright's caustic humor and his seemingly endless string of anecdotes, playing hangman with Scooter on the red eye flight back from San Francisco and laughing at Tree and Sarge battle over who misplaced a pair of shorts, with Sarge muttering "I got your old man, fat boy!"

I will remember Charlie's YMCA ball player imitation, Rodney christening Kyle "Screech" and talking to Mrs. Wainwright and Mrs. Heflin in the basketball office before practice.

I will remember going to see Sommersby at the ACC tournament, playing twenty questions

with Scott and Tim the whole way to Phoenix, and reading poetry with Coach Odom at Alcatraz. And I will remember walking back from dinner one cold night with Ricardo, Marc, Tim Seymour, Kerry and Kyle in the falling Alaskan snow.

Basketball has compiled many of my college memories and it has largely controlled my emotions. Bland times are rare; most all of my memories are stingingly bad or blissfully satisfying, but even the bad times have a certain bittersweetness, such as the vivid memory of absolute despair and numbing disbelief after our loss to Carolina my sophomore year as I watched our substantial 22-point lead slowly dissipate, ending with a last second loss.

That sinking sensation is indelible in my mind, as is the smell of the muggy locker room thick with sweat and tears. The short trip from Chapel Hill was endless — as we all sat silent, stunned and aching.

There is no escaping the pain when you are part of the basketball family. You cannot leave the coliseum early when a defeat is inevitable or turn off the TV and forget. There is no perspective during the season and at times nothing else seems to matter. I am only a manager — not a player or a coach — but I still internalize our team's well-being and I know that the feeling after losses is all-encompassing, with remarkable staying power.

The contrast between the bad and good times is so sharp, that it is almost as if I am a part of two distinct experiences. The losses give the highs a sharper, sweeter presence. When we win, I savor every nuance — each smile, high-five and sentiment of Coach Odom's post-game talk, no matter how mundane or eloquent. I concentrate so as to preserve the moment and weave each word and expression into the contented tapestry of victory.

Beating Iowa in Nashville last year to advance to the Sweet Sixteen the weekend of my twenty-first birthday epitomized the euphoric side of basketball. I can say with absolute conviction that it was the happiest episode of my life. I was so conscious of the perfection of the time, that I will never be accused of taking it for granted. Waiting in the dimly lit hallway outside the locker room at Memorial Gymnasium, taking pictures of a jubilant Derrick Hicks on the bus as we drove to the airport, loading suitcases onto our plane, and putting damp hightop sneakers back on the shelves in the equipment room with Kyle and Timmy Lynde, I was constantly aware that I was living my dream. And that I was as lucky as Wendy George had been. And that someday, I will remember these times — the good and bad — fondly.

Basketball may only be a game to me then, but I will remember that at one time in my life, it was much, much more.