



## Teams of Dreams

*A basketball memoir on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “Hoosiers”*

By Steven Goldstein



Every year at this time, we become acquainted from afar with the stories of young men who by talent and circumstance come together on a common quest for an ultimate prize. Filled with virtually every emotion in the sporting playbook, the three-week drama that is the NCAA men’s basketball championship captivates those among us who not only yearn to win a few bucks in the office pool or capture bracketology bragging rights, but who are simply seduced by the irresistible narratives of boys performing feats heroic, workmanlike, and yes, sometimes even clueless, in their quest for a title.

Who are these boys, and the teams that take on their collective identities? No matter what the tournament — whether this month’s Final Four or a state high school championship — the squads that stand out are the ones that tend to overcome great odds; where heart, and sometimes luck, is more important than talent. And where sometimes, as Butler coach Brad Stevens noted after his team’s upset of #1 seed Pittsburgh in the Southeast Regional last week, one team simply has the ball last.

We think of the obvious, iconic candidates: N.C. State’s Wolfpack — and Jimmy V. — in 1983; Rollie’s Villanova Wildcats a couple of years later; Don Haskins’ Texas Western Miners in 1966. And note for the record that had Gordon Hayward’s last-second, desperation heave for Butler in last year’s title game against Duke gone in, a new leader in this category would have shot instantaneously to the top of the list. (Not that Butler was a serious underdog in the game; merely that it played in a less-heralded program and conference.)



Butler's run to the championship last year — playing the Final Four in its hometown of Indianapolis — conjured up memories of a couple of other iconic Indiana teams, both from another time and, one might say, another place ... although the physical location was actually the same. These teams made their stands in storied Hinkle Fieldhouse, the same building in Indianapolis that Butler today calls home. (The 83-year-old facility used to be called Butler Fieldhouse, but was renamed in 1966 for longtime Bulldogs coach Tony Hinkle). This old barn is the scene of many of the state's greatest hardwood moments. Chief among these is "The Milan Miracle," the improbable victory of tiny Milan (pronounced MY-lun) High School, enrollment 161, over Muncie Central, a school ten times its size, in the Indiana State High School Championship game on March 20, 1954. With three seconds left in a tie game, Milan's star player, Bobby Plump, drove to his right from the top of the key, pulled up, and lofted a soft jumper over the outstretched hands of Jimmy Barnes and into history.

Today, that game is still remembered in state basketball lore and cited in regional histories. The town of Milan itself, in the Southeast corner of the state, has become the object of quasi-religious pilgrimages by fans and entire teams, from all over the country and from around the world. Here, in a community of barely 2,000, nearly 60 years after the event, the flame is kept alive by the tireless efforts of one Roselyn McKittrick, a retiree who simply fell in love with the story and with "her boys." Together with a band of volunteers, she maintains a small museum devoted to the Milan Indians, located in the building that used to house the barbershop on the town's main street. Although you'd be forgiven for thinking that Milan is stuck in time — industry has largely left and has been slow to return — the high school at least has a modern gym in which are proudly displayed the championship banner and the prized trophy from the 1954 tournament.



The Milan teams of that era were made up of sons of farmers; kids who worked the fields after school (and sometimes before) and played basketball in just about every other nook and cranny of the day. It was pure '50s Americana (the white version, to be sure), and in the rural Midwest, especially Indiana, basketball was an essential ingredient. Small towns dotted the landscape, and teams generally aspired to win their local sectional tournaments; that's because those that won those tournaments tended to lose in the subsequent regionals, usually to larger teams from more urban areas.

In the season before their championship run, those sons of Milan — led by Bobby Plump, backcourt mate Ray Craft, and 5' 11" center Gene White — went farther than most small schools could dream: through the sectionals and regionals and on to the Semi-State, Indiana's version of the Final Four, where they lost to eventual winner South Bend Central. Despite the loss, this run effectively put to rest the myth that the following year's championship team came out of nowhere; on the contrary, they were a powerhouse — in talent if not in size — to be reckoned with.

With expectations thus high the following fall, the Indians blew through their regular and conference season, finishing with a 21-2 record. They once again advanced through the sectional and regional tournaments to reach the Semi-State, where, en route to the final — in Hinkle Fieldhouse — they beat a strong Crispus Attucks team that featured a young sophomore forward named Oscar Robertson. (Robertson's Attucks teams would go on to win the state title the next two years, going undefeated in the 1955-56 season.) And while no one in Indiana underestimated Milan's chances in the final, the favorite was clearly mighty Muncie Central, which had won the title two of the previous three years.



The game featured coach Marvin Wood's "cat-and-mouse" offense — a precursor to the "four corners" popularized by Dean Smith at North Carolina a generation later — in which Milan held the ball for minutes at a stretch. The Indians led for most of the game, but had to rally from a late deficit to tie the game in the final minutes, thus setting the stage for Plump's last-second heroics that would forever be etched in the minds and hearts of diehard Indiana basketball fans.

But Milan, of course — and that shot — is also remembered for something else: the inspiration for that other, and perhaps more famous of the Indiana dream teams, the fictional Hickory Huskers of the movie "Hoosiers," a film that has been called the best basketball movie ever made, by [espn.com](http://espn.com), and one of the all-time greatest sports movies, by *Sports Illustrated* and many other publications. It was inevitable that Butler's 2010 run to the championship game, with its multiple Milan parallels, would bring comparisons not only with the '54 state champs, but with its celluloid cousins as well.

"Hoosiers" premiered in Indianapolis 25 years ago this Thanksgiving. The year before, screenwriter Angelo Pizzo and director David Anspaugh — Indiana natives, and classmates at Indiana University and USC — embarked on the project that they had dreamed of for years: to make a movie about the Milan Miracle that they had heard about so often growing up in small-town Indiana. After researching the teams' players, however, Pizzo decided that their lives were not dramatic enough, and so sought to tell a story that would be more broadly appealing, and, yes, more commercial.

Some have argued that this departure from the real narrative came at a cost, given that less attention would be paid to the larger issues of class and race that were so important during this time in America, and which increasingly came to the surface in the stories of Milan's later opponents — more urban



and integrated — as the team went deeper and deeper in its run to the championship. Thus in 1986, as Phil Raisor — then a college professor but on that fateful day in 1954 a starting guard on the losing Muncie Bearcats — sat in the audience of the movie’s premiere at a theater near his home in Virginia, he couldn’t help but reflect on the larger themes of prejudice and segregation that were part of a history he knew were much larger than a single basketball game.

But Pizzo did not set out to make a documentary; he wanted instead to make a film about the values, hopes, and challenges of a small Indiana town at mid-century. In a 2004 interview, he said “what I found interesting about it was not the little team that could, but the unique fabric of basketball in Indiana — how it’s interwoven with the culture ... its meaning and importance. And I was particularly drawn to the time as well ... the early ‘50s have always interested me because, I suppose, it was the last era or last period of true regionalism, before television homogenized the consciousness, the language of the subcultures of America.”

To depict that era on the court the filmmakers selected quite a team — all except one a basketball-playing Indiana native. Consider that the shooting guard on this fictional team (Steve Hollar, who played Rade Butcher) hit the crucial basket at the end of his high school’s championship game, the year before, to give his team the state title. The sixth man on this squad (Wade Schenk, who played Ollie) played on a team that reached the Semi-State in *his* high school’s run for the championship. (Trivia: Schenk, whose character as the equipment manager was the least skilled on the Hickory Huskers, was arguably the best real-life player of the bunch.) The squad’s locker room conscience (Kent Poole, who played Merle, and who uttered the film’s iconic line, “Let’s win this one for all the small schools that never had a chance to get here”) had come from yet another Semi-State squad; he, incidentally, had just missed



putting *his* team into his own championship round with a last-second shot that was literally in the hoop — just before it achingly rimmed out. And, as must always be the case when central casting is real life, one of the players, Maras Valainis, was cut twice by his high school squad and took up golf instead. As fate would have it, on *this* team, Valainis’s Jimmy Chitwood was the star player.

The fictional story, of course, is well known: a tale of second-chances and redemption: for a coach with a troubled past, for the town drunk (Dennis Hopper, in his Oscar-nominated best supporting actor role), for the team, and even for the town, as it struggled to make sense of the way the country was changing at the time, and how those changes impacted the lives of its residents. As Gene Hackman, who played coach Norman Dale, said about the movie in a 2006 interview: “It’s about basketball, I suppose; but it’s not *just* about basketball. It couldn’t work if it were.”

And yet the basketball story of course provides the film’s dramatic and emotional underpinning. A team of undisciplined but talented boys, taught and inspired by their unconventional coach, slowly begins to believe in themselves, and in each other, in their march toward an unlikely championship. The final seconds of the final game — shot in Hinkle Fieldhouse — mirrored the actual Milan story: Jimmy Chitwood gets the ball at the top of the key, takes one dribble to his right, stops, and launches his picture-perfect jumper to bring the Cinderella story to a picture-perfect end. (Trivia: Valainis had missed all of his jumpers in practice before the camera was turned on to film the final sequence.)

If we were somehow so hardened or cynical that we couldn’t feel the emotional impact of that moment, we could always turn to “An Advanced Statistical Analysis of Jimmy Chitwood’s Basketball Performance in *Hoosiers*,” a



tongue-in-cheek, though mildly rigorous, blog report published last week in which the Harvard College Sports Analysis Collective put Chitwood's game statistics under a microscope in order to determine whether he was the best fictional athlete ever. Turns out he was ... but the filmmakers didn't need any of that science 25 years earlier, when they instinctively knew what the movie's tagline would be: "It'll go straight to your heart."

To commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the movie in 2006, a group of local Indiana citizens organized a week-long celebration in the state in which, on the final weekend, the actors and filmmakers came back to share their memories with the film's legions of fans. (The big three — Hackman, Hopper, and Barbara Hershey — did not attend.) The event drew hundreds of people, some from as far away as California, to meet Angelo Pizzo, Steve Hollar, Wade Schenk, Maris Valainis, Brad Long (who played Buddy), and several others who had lesser roles in the film. In addition, members of the '54 Milan team were also present, and proudly front-and-center, for the festivities. As an added bonus, the celebration was held in Knightstown, about 40 miles east of Indianapolis, home to the little crackerbox gym recognizable to all fans of the movie as the home court of the Hickory Huskers. Several of the events were held in that gym, including screenings of the film, an autograph session, dinner, and an auction of film memorabilia. Believe it or not, that black-and-white photo of Coach Dale and the Huskers — slowly and lovingly panned into as the final shot in the movie — still hangs on the west wall of the building.

Last March, in honor of Butler's 2010 run, several members of the Milan team attended the Final Four in Indianapolis as guests of the state's governor, Mitch Daniels. These proud men are now in their mid-to-late 70s (one has passed away), all of them having gone on to careers and opportunities — mostly as coaches and teachers — that, they all admit, might not have been open to



them had Plump's shot not gone through the net on that fateful day nearly 60 years ago.

That's because in an era when farmboys stayed on the farm, virtually every member of the Milan team eventually went on to college (including Plump to — where else? — Butler, where he had a superb career). But their story affected not just them: "There were more that went to college out of my graduating class than the previous four years total," says Plump. "Those years ('53 and '54) raised the expectation of not just the players but the students. They said, 'You know, we might be able to do this.' That was really what the value of those two years were."

Even now, 57 years after their miracle, not one of the team's members believes he is defined by what happened in that single game back in 1954. They are humbled by the continued interest in their story, realize its significance in basketball lore, and are happy to talk about it if asked, but all know that their lives have been shaped by so much more than their feats on the court. This is, of course, the natural progression of maturity and perspective, but it is also the living legacy of a golden moment in time.

As the 2011 NCAA tournament winds down to crown an eventual winner next week, the champion certainly doesn't have to be from Indiana to build its own story of hope and accomplishment. But a little dash of Hoosier sparkle probably couldn't hurt.

*(Postscript: Butler eventually made it to the 2011 finals, but lost in the championship game, to Connecticut.)*