

FIBA FINAL FOUR EXPERIENCE

Post #31: Final Four Week, An Incredible Experience

Tue Feb 12, 2008

I thought I had seen it all when it came to the game of basketball. There have been NBA Finals, NCAA Final Fours, recruiting wars, ejections at every level for every conceivable reason and players fighting in the stands with spectators or choking coaches. I say thought, because after last weekend's experience at the Final Four for the Liga De Las Americas in Mexicali, another experience has been added to the mix. Nothing could ever have prepared me for the passion shown by the people of Mexico for their home team or their extremely loud vocal support to see them succeed against all of the participants, but especially the team representing the USA. Nothing could have prepared me for their reverence for the participants who were treated like kings, including police escorts through the streets where traffic was brought to a halt and the hometowners waved frantically to get a view of what team the bus was transporting. And nothing could have prepared me for the camaraderie displayed by the players representing four different countries despite battling tooth and nail on the floor for the chance of winning this international tournament. To call this weekend incredible, would be an understatement. So much was jammed into this four day stay that it would be hard to convey it all in a short blog. I'll try to capture the highlights of the trip in a couple of entries so you too can live the experience.

It all started with a 4:30 AM EST wake up call to get to MIA to catch a flight and begin the trip from hell. Six and a half hours later we landed in Mexico City, with a four hour layover to hop our next flight to Tijuana. Whoever dreamed this trip up should be flogged as bringing a team across the country the day before a game is a joke, even without two three hour plane rides and a three hour bus ride over the mountains of Mexico to get to our final destination 17 hours later. Any thoughts of practicing were thrown out the window as our scheduled practice time coincided with the tip off dinner where all teams were to attend. So off we went in a police escorted bus to another location to break bread with the other combatants. It was cordial enough but eyebrows were raised when the head of the FIBA federation of basketball spoke and went on record to say that he was hoping that Soles of Mexicali, the home team, would win because the governor of the state had ponied up the money to host the event. Not a real smart move considering all the officials were sitting to his right and all of the other owners were in attendance. While the comments were disturbing, we had more important things to think about like getting our team back to the hotel for any sleep they could find and prepare for tomorrow's game against Penarol of Argentina, the team that I felt was the one to beat.

We were supposed to open on Thursday against the home Mexican club in the Final Four format, we being the #1 seed and Soles #4, but someone got the

bright idea of changing the schedule 5 days before the event to a round-robin, and we drew the short stick having to play the #2 seed 24 hours after we arrived in town. Who is doing the thinking here?

Oh well, just another obstacle we'll have to overcome. Time to hit the sack, as we weren't afforded the extra day to acclimate like the teams from Brazil and Argentina, when they flew in a day earlier. We will see what tomorrow brings.

Post #32: Down, But Not Out - Day Two at the Final Four

Wed Feb 13, 2008

Our hopes were high on Thursday in Mexicali, as it was gameday, and all the nonsense preceding today was behind us. We had scouted Penarol of Argentina well, knew what to look for and who were the guys that could beat us. At about 9 AM a police escort (man, I love this stuff) took us to the arena for our first look at the court, and the 12,000 empty seats which would be filled later that evening. The guys looked a little sluggish but we needed to overcome that tired feeling if we were to have any chance of getting this very important, game one tonight. There were about 100 workers in the place, watching us go through our preparations or just wanting to see the team from the USA. Knowing the charity stripe would be a factor in the evening's game, we held a free throw shooting contest at the end of practice before returning to the hotel for some rest and a pregame meal.

We returned to the arena about two hours before the game and the atmosphere was already picking up. Vendors inside were selling everything, from food to drinks to toys to clothes. You name it and you could probably buy it there. There wasn't much to the game as after a solid start, we got behind by ten points and never really made a serious run. We always seemed a step behind or an inch short. The 94-77 loss was more disturbing because it was an 8 point game with about two minutes to go and FIBA tournaments have a way of coming down to a point tie breaker and the points we frittered away at the end could cost us (and eventually did!).

The night came to a fitting end as water started flooding the locker room, from under the floor, as the team was dressing to leave. We decided to stay and watch a bit of Game #2, between Soles de Mexicali and Minas of Brazil, to see what we'd be facing the next two days. Returning inside the arena I was surprised to see the place packed to the rafters. When our game ended there were probably about 2,500 fans in the seats but in the next 30 minutes the place had become 12,000 strong. While it was great to see, I could only start thinking ahead to tomorrow, and our must win game with the home team. With these rabid fans and the electric atmosphere, it should be fun.

Post #33: A Day to Remember, In More Ways Than One - Day Three at the Final Four

Thu Feb 14, 2008

Our third day in Mexicali, for the Final Four, proved to be one that anyone present, will always remember. The action was heated between the lines, and even hotter outside. There were referees inside, Federalis and ambulances outside. It was too much excitement for one day.

The day started quietly enough, with breakfast and then a team meeting prior to our shootaround. The meeting was designed to cover our mistakes the prior evening and give the players a scouting report on tonight's encounter, with the home team, Soles. What we got was a passionate display of emotion which ended in a united team as we left the room. I liked where we were! The shootaround was crisp and the team seemed very relaxed. With coaches and supporters of the home team all over the gym, we decided not to show too many of the adjustments we made for the game. The team got out the kinks and we returned to the hotel for some more rest. Our legs looked to be back and I was counting on a big effort.

When we returned to the arena five hours later, we were greeted by a throng of Mexicans who now looked at us as the enemy. We had received polite applause the night before, but tonight we were taking on the home team, in their place, with their crowd, including the Governor of the State. By the time the opening tip had arrived, there were 15,000 in the seats, being whipped into a frenzy. I'm not sure I've ever been in a louder situation, anywhere.

Fast forward in a very physical and exciting encounter, where boos and cheers were constant for two hours. We led 100-97, 0:35 on the clock and Soles had the ball. When Lopez hit the three to tie, the sound was so deafening I thought the place was going to collapse (keep that in mind for later). As the Tropics returned to the bench for the beginning of overtime there was some commotion going on behind our players. Seems a shoving match between a Soles fan and one of our staff was about to erupt and our guys were ready to go over the seats to bail him out. When calm was restored, the fan was ejected by the Federalis, and 8 more were lined up behind our bench for protection as the overtime began.

The exhausting night was about to end. After falling behind by 5 with 2:25 remaining, the Tropics went on a 15-0 run to secure the game and send the crowd and the governor home in near tears. The locker room celebration was loud and animated and a sense of relief entered the room. It may have well been the biggest victory in Tropics history, on the road over the home team Mexican Champs who had not lost in their arena in two years, some 65 games ago. But we all knew that if we did not win in the Saturday finale, this win would become meaningless, so it was back to the hotel for dinner and a good night's

sleep to prepare for Brazil.

As I lay on my bed in the hotel watching Sportscenter, something happened to derail that rest. I felt a funny vibration under me and then watched in horror, as my bed moved 2 ft to the left, then 2 ft to the right! Holy cow! The hotel was shaking and I was getting the hell out of there! We dressed in record time and ran for the stairs, down three flights and out the door. Some of the team was already outside, having been in the dining area while the earth decided to shake us senseless. Others never came out, either slept right through it or didn't think it was a big deal. The numbers came back, a major earthquake registering at 5.4 on the Richter Scale!

The Mexican terrain put a much bigger scare into us than the champion basketball team of the country. Luckily, we survived both. Now we have to focus on tomorrow and the South American champion of 2007. It will be tough, but after tonight, easier.

Post #34: A Celebration of Basketball, Unlike Any Other - The Final Day

Tue Feb 19, 2008

Even after the big win over Mexico, our medal opportunities did not include gold. Because of the crazy tie breaker rules we would get a silver with a win over Brazil and a win by Argentina. A loss would leave us out completely so the game versus Minas Tenis was important for our program and our players' aspirations of landing a contract overseas.

With the early start (3 PM) we decided to skip the shootaround and have the players report directly to the bus to go to the game. The earthquake had screwed up any timetable we would have had and this seemed like the best way to have the players ready for this medal game. Brazil is the reigning South American Champion and was hearing it from back home having lost their first two games. I guess the pressure was high on their outstanding point guard, Facundo Sucatzky, who guaranteed a win on day three, versus the USA. BIG MISTAKE!

We made it our mission to stop this guy, who looks like an older version of John Stockton. His court vision is exceptional and he has all the passes, from any angle and distance. He was averaging 16 points and 12 assists per game and we knew if we could keep him busy we would win. We played well in the first half but it was obvious the game last evening took its toll. Barnes drew the assignment on Sucatzky and was outstanding, getting physical with the superstar at every opportunity.

Problem was Marcus looked extremely tired and his work on the defensive end cost him offensively where his shot was off all afternoon.

Watson, Mitchell and Shelman all took their turns and were just as effective in slowing the attack. We took a 6 point lead into halftime but seemed in total control of the game. We then played our worst quarter of basketball in the entire tournament and fell behind by 10 at the end of three, scoring only 8 points. We needed to suck it up one last time for the Miami Tropics and the USA. We closed the deficit quickly and had a two point lead when Minas tied the game with 17.5 seconds to play. We designed the play to go to Watson but with heavy pressure on him Barnes got the ball and drove to the basket. He was cut off, reversed direction and was taken to the ground with 8 seconds left. FOUL! Marcus had missed 18 of 22 shots during the game but had the intestinal fortitude to knock down the two free throws which gave us the game after a last ditch attempt missed.

Mission Accomplished! We finished 2-1 (no team would have a better record in the entire tournament) and held Sucatzky to 6 points, 9 assists and 9 turnovers. Now we waited to see if it would be silver or bronze. Penarol was down a few late and played just not to lose by 13 or more, which would guarantee them the gold. Soles won the game but by only 5 and they received the silver, even though we beat them head to head.

The ceremony was Olympic style with platforms, confetti, cheerleaders and media everywhere. This was a big deal! I don't think it hit me how big until we left the arena and people were mobbing every player and coach for autographs, pictures and the like. The Argentineans were crying and thanking every one of our players for winning today (a loss by us would have given Mexico the gold). I have never seen any team, at any level, so grateful and elated to win a championship. The next day there was a parade in Penarol, which drew 150,000 people to celebrate this championship.

If only the international basketball scene would catch on here as it does abroad. These guys play for the pride of their homeland, not the paychecks. Refreshing! The experience of the weekend was one I won't soon forget. There was good, there was bad, but it was always exciting. It also turned out to be a bonanza for many of our players. Rosario and Richards have been drafted to play professionally in Puerto Rico. Barnes, Robinson and Shelman will be going to the Dominican Republic to play, Dumont will be going to Venezuela and Watson is already in Mexico and his club is trying to land Mitchell, too. Opportunities abound, from a tournament which few gave a second glance here in the USA. What a shame.