

NCAA finals a time for sporty cultural exchange

Fans at NCAA finals provided a variety of sometimes comic though insightful opinions.

Those of you who are kicking yourself for missing this past weekend's NCAA Final Four in Atlanta may now breathe a sigh of relief.

I was in attendance for the Oklahoma-Indiana and Kansas-Maryland games on March 30, and as a public service, I am here to offer a blow-by-blow account of the action behind the action, the

Jay Cridlin

STUDENT COLUMNIST

hoopla behind the hype behind the hoops.

Let's begin with the city of Atlanta, a bustling southern metropolis that has certainly witnessed its share of recent sporting history.

Over the course of the last decade, Atlanta has staked its reputation as America's kaiser of large-scale event planning, making it a popular site for Super Bowls, Olympics, World Series, Star Trek conventions, Woodstocks, Kentucky Derbies and papal coronations.

What makes Atlanta the perfect host for any and all of these events – aside, of course, from its world-class strip clubs-per-square kilometer ratio – is that presumably, no other city would willingly thrust upon its citizens such luminaries as ESPN commentator Dick Vitale, a man so unpredictably hyperexcitable that he should be accompanied at all times by, at minimum, the Crocodile Hunter?

I had a chance to see Vitale up close, to even have my picture taken with him, in Atlanta's ESPNZone restaurant/bar/arcade/arena/compound, where ESPN's college basketball crew had set up camp while in town.

If you have never visited an ESPNZone restaurant, imagine a Chuck E. Cheese drenched in equine steroids, and you will have an idea of the ultra-competitive aggro-masculine vibe you get once you enter the arcade.

There are virtual versions of every sport imaginable, including virtual hockey, virtual horse racing, virtual whitewater rafting, virtual biathlon, and a fully stocked wet bar, in case you decide to get virtually hammered.

However, the ESPNZone lies a virtual light year from the actual on-court action, so one could spend only minimal time there, gazing at the national championship trophy on display, before heading downtown to the place it would ultimately be dispensed: the Georgia Dome.

In an effort to tap the pulse of the city and find out who the common man thought would cut down the nets, I took the MARTA subway, a mass transit system so crowded it makes Hong Kong's bicycle district look like the Gobi Desert.

When you pack several thousand people into a single MARTA car, Hot-lanta becomes Humid-lanta, which inevitably gives way to the ever-popular Sweat-lanta. Trust me – if Georgia is the Peach State, try and avoid the pits, if you know what I'm saying.

While MARTA was stocked with fans from each school, the conversation was dominated by the man seated next to me, who made it clear to the entire car – in between diatribes on his personal lord and savior Jesus Christ and the quality of the women in the state of Texas – that he believed Indiana would win.

"Ain't no joke," he slurred. "Larry Bird is superior, and Indiana is the state of basketball. They got a chance to do it, and guess what they're going to do? The best they can. They got the most

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heart. I got to go with Indiana. I don't have no choice!"

The man made a good case. And it should be pointed out that of all the fans who made the trip to Atlanta, the Hoosier faithful were definitely the most likely to hoot, holler and possibly sneak a live heifer past security. But it was still tough to say which school had the largest fan presence in Atlanta.

The night before, my traveling entourage had crashed a party at the hotel in which Kansas was staying. And I'm not talking about Kansas the team – I'm talking about the entire state of Kansas. Thousands of Midwestern basketball fans had flocked to Atlanta apparently to root for the Jayhawks and drink truly copious amounts of beer on the alumni association's dime.

We had several hours to kill before finding our seats, so we milled about outside the Georgia Dome. At the nearby CNN Center, I bumped into Cheryl Price, the mother of Oklahoma star Hollis Price, on her way toward the Georgia Dome. I asked her if Hollis had the shakes.

"Every team and every player will be nervous, but he can do it," she said. "I believe that Oklahoma will probably beat (Indiana). The only thing they'll have to do is play defense and play like they've been playing."

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Upon entering the arena, we found that our seats were fairly high off the court, in the sense that Kernersville is a fair distance from Equatorial Guinea. We were escorted by Sherpas.

This simply wouldn't do. As the games wore on, we managed to sneak down to the lower level, ultimately finding a few empty seats right behind the CBS desk anchored by Greg Gumbel and Clark Kellogg.

At this point, I will answer the one question that I am sure is on everyone's mind: no, Greg Gumbel does not carry a pick for his man-perm.

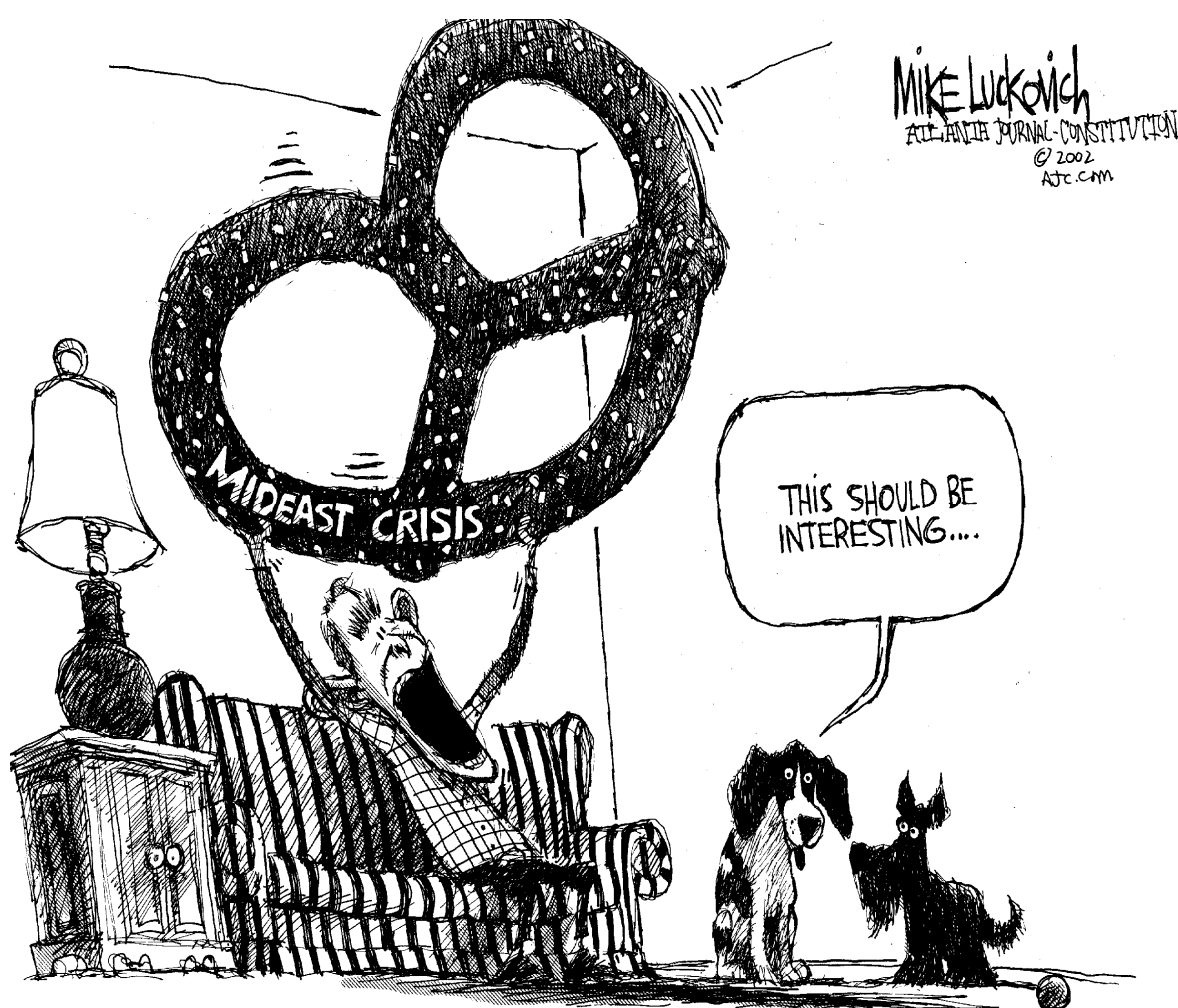
I won't bore you with an account of the games, but by day's end, only Maryland and Indiana were left standing. (Score one for the insane MARTA bloc!) And as we all know, Maryland walked away with the big prize.

I must admit, I knew the Terrapins would win, based on one final expert opinion the city of Atlanta had to offer.

As I returned from the Georgia Dome sometime after midnight, I passed a businessperson of Asian descent leaving my hotel. He appeared to be operating on Taipei time, striding about in a three-piece suit, sporting a cell phone and briefcase and generally looking as though he was late for an 8 a.m. conference call. Just then, he saw a gaggle of Indiana fans. In full stride, the man pointed at the Hoosiers, and coolly, even suavely, uttered just one word: "Terps."

You simply cannot argue with that. And neither could Indiana.

So to sum up, this year's Final Four was one hot, sweaty, fetid, dangling slab of basketball action that everyone in attendance will not soon forget. At least until next year, when the Final Four hits New Orleans. I hope to see you there. I'll be the one dancing on the wet bar at the Kansas party.



Ranchers threaten wilderness

President should preserve 'America the beautiful.'

President George W. Bush's sanctuary has always been his ranch in Crawford, Texas; in my eyes, he always seemed more comfortable decked out in a denim shirt and cowboy boots talking John Deere than in a suit and tie talking John

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acreage in the lower 48 states, is used for private ranching. Including private land, cattle graze on about 70 percent of the Western land.

In the 1800s, ranchers bought land from the U.S. government for a few dollars per acre; the land was cheap because selling the land helped the government drive out Native Americans and Mexicans.

"After buying a relatively small amount of land, a rancher often gained exclusive grazing privileges to thousand or even tens of thousands of federally owned acres adjacent to his property," Jacobs said. "Today most grazing permits are technically up for renewal every 10 years, but renewal is essentially automatic. Once a rancher gains a permit, it's almost as though the public land becomes his property."

Jacobs goes as far to call the ranchers "the original welfare kings" because out of a 14,000-acre spread, a rancher may actually own a mere 40 to 80 acres, while the rest of the property is government land that he or she is allowed to use. In 1999, the fee for grazing a steer on government land was \$1.35 for a month – in other words, fattening an 800-pound steer on government land was cheaper than feeding a house cat. The fees are so low, in fact, that the federal grazing program costs the government more money that it generates.

The ranchers themselves are indeed an elite bunch. According to *Fortune*, 2.5 percent of the nation's ranchers own government livestock permits, and the ranchers pay one-quarter the price that they would for equitable private land.

It's no secret that cattle wreak havoc on the land. "Cattle are far less selective about what they eat, and are capable of stripping the land of almost every kind of plant," Jacobs said. Grazing also contributes to erosion because there are fewer roots to anchor the soil during heavy rains.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of all is the obliteration of indigenous wildlife such as the grizzly bear, antelope, elk, pronghorn and bighorn. In addition to paying for ranching roads, gates and cattle crossing, the government also pays for barbed wire, which disturbs wild animals' migratory patterns.

Wild animals sometimes starve during winter months because cattle have eaten nearly all edible vegetation during the summer and fall. During the winter cattle feed

Ashcroft. Without a doubt, the ranch fits in with his carefully cultivated image of himself as a God-fearin', don't-mess-with-Texas everyman. And let's not forget his famous, or rather infamous, impersonation of John Wayne following Sept. 11: "I want justice. There's an old poster out West that as I recall said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'"

It is disappointing that Bush seems to take so much genuine joy in the American West and has indeed incorporated it into his persona, yet he continues the U.S. government's long legacy of destruction in the region.

I recently learned that the Bureau of Land Management, which controls millions of acres of wilderness in the United States, has responded to ranchers who need open areas to graze livestock by rounding up some of the 45,000 wild horses. According to David Jaynes, an assistant field manager of the BLM, a lack of the horses' natural predators such as the wolf has caused their population to skyrocket, straining natural resources. "The horses) are not only hurting our livelihood," Nevada State Sen. Dean Rhoads, a rancher, said. "They are) also hurting the deer, the antelope and the elk."

The BLM has established an adoption program for the wild horses, but some wind up in a slaughterhouse after a year when their owners are allowed to sell them. This is hypocrisy, pure and simple. The cattle industry treads far more heavily on the West than horses ever could; the only difference is that the cattle help accrue a profit, and the horses do not.

In September the Fund for Animals and the Animal Legal Defense fund filed a lawsuit to stop the BLM, but a movement to protect the West and its indigenous species began, in fact, in the 1980s when Lynn Jacobs decided to use his inheritance to rally support to end ranching on public lands.

Under the jurisdiction of the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, 306 million acres of public land, or 41 percent of the land in 11 western states or 25 percent of the total

on hay provided by the ranchers, but wild species are not so lucky.

In 1997, Wildlife Services spent \$14.6 million to kill over 90,000 animals that were perceived as a threat to cattle and sheep grazing lands. In 1988, 275 black bears, 1,158 bobcats, 75,869 coyotes, 669 gray foxes, 4,057 red foxes, 192 mountain lions, 124,292 prairie dogs and 53 timber wolves were killed. No numbers are available on wild animals shot, poisoned or trapped by ranchers themselves.

The prairie dog, which wilderness biologists describe as a "keystone species," is a prime example of how the demise of one species can directly affect others. In the case of the prairie dog, which has been struck from over 99 percent of the habitat they lived in before the 19th century, hawks, mice, coyotes and bison have been affected.

At the root of the problem is a skewed view about the worth of the land and the animals that live on it. A rancher's wife whom Jacobs interviewed said, "I believe grass was put here by the good Lord for us to raise livestock. If you don't graze this public land's grass then what are you going to do with it?"

Jacobs replied, "Not much; I'd leave it mostly for wild animals and the rest of nature."

The rancher's wife responded, "Now, what are you going to do with all those wild animals?"

The point is that we are not necessarily meant to do anything with those animals. An animal's worth is not derived solely from what it can provide for humans. Rather than worrying about what benefit an animal provides for us, we should honor the inherent worth of the land and all of the species that live on it.

Saving the pronghorn may seem like a frivolous pursuit after Sept. 11, but I feel that we cannot forget that we have a vice president who once denounced conservation as a "personal virtue." The pronghorn, the prairie dog, the bison and the dozens of other species are not just single animals but links in a food chain, indispensable parts of an ecosystem.

Protecting the environment is not just a choice, like whether or not to have cheddar on a Deacon Burger, but an unshakable responsibility.

The government should conserve our natural resources, put money into developing alternate sources of fuel, develop jobs that preserve rather than punish the land, hold those who pollute accountable and encourage organic farming because that's what's good for the environment and for our bodies in the long run.

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