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Cavaliers were historically dramatic and left a lasting memory

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Virginia basketball faithful are chill by now, basking in the Cavaliers' national championship, hazing rival fans and envisioning the banner in John Paul Jones Arena.

But U.Va.'s journey to "One Shining Moment" was the antithesis of chill. Indeed, one scroll through Phony Bennett's priceless Twitter feed the past few weeks reveals terror, chest pains, Pete Gillen-level perspiration and considerable bourbon consumption.

"We like to make things interesting," sophomore forward Jay Huff said after the Cavaliers' 85-77 overtime conquest of Texas Tech in Monday's title game.

Interesting? Interesting?!!

Let's try historically dramatic.

Virginia is college basketball's first national champion since Arizona in 1997 whose final four tournament games were decided by single-digit margins. Moreover, the Cavaliers' frequent brushes with postseason death, and their unimaginable escapes, were reminiscent of the tournament's most magical run.

The late Jim Valvano proclaimed his 1983 North Carolina State squad a "team of destiny," and he was right.

A pedestrian 17-10 during an injury-plagued regular season, the Wolfpack first upset Michael Jordan-led North Carolina and Ralph Sampson-led Virginia to win the ACC tournament. Then things got really weird.

In the NCAA tournament's first round, State defeated Pepperdine 69-67 in double-overtime, reaching the second OT only after Dane Suttle, an 84-percent career free-throw shooter, missed the front end of a one-and-one twice in the final 30 seconds of the first OT.

UNLV led the Wolfpack 70-69 in the second round with 32 seconds remaining, but Eldridge Hudson missed the front end of a bonus free throw. Thurl Bailey's follow of a Dereck Whittenburg miss with three seconds left sent State to the West Regionals.

There the Wolfpack routed Utah in the semifinals and ended Sampson's career in the final, prevailing 63-62 when Tim Mullen and Othell Wilson missed shots on the game's final possession.

After dismissing Georgia in a Final Four semifinal, State defeated Akeem Olajuwon, Clyde Drexler and Houston 54-52 for the national championship as Lorenzo Charles dunked Whittenburg's airball at the horn.

Whittenburg's miss was arguably the tournament's most providential until ...

With 5.9 seconds remaining in regulation of this year's South Regional final, Virginia trailed Purdue 70-67. Fouled by Nojel Eastern, U.Va.'s Ty Jerome went to the line for a one-and-one and stroked the first.

Jerome remains comically coy about what transpired next, but purposely or mistakenly, he short-armed the second. Teammate Mamadi Diakite tapped the rebound deep into the backcourt, where Kihei Clark regained possession for Virginia and passed to Diakite, whose catch-and-shoot 12-footer beat the clock and forced overtime.

Virginia won 80-75, and that's when it first occurred to me: This is another team of destiny.

The evidence bordered on indisputable when Kyle Guy made a contested 3-pointer and three fearless free throws in the final 10 seconds to lift the Cavaliers over Auburn 63-62 in a Final Four semifinal. A missed free throw by the Tigers' Jared Harper — he made a team-best 82.8 percent for the season — and last-second foul by Samir Doughty aided U.Va.'s cause immeasurably.

The implausible victory advanced the Cavaliers to the championship game and prompted head coach Tony Bennett, a man of abiding Christian faith, to ponder destiny.

"I believe our steps are ordered," he said on the eve of the title contest. "I think you walk and you do everything you can with the abilities you've been given as players, as coaches, and then you trust. I just, I believe that. So the fact that we're here, yeah, I think there's been a hand in this. In my life, I'd be foolish not to believe that. ...

"Again, I use scripture, and I understand everybody is at different places. But ... one of the things we talked about is, don't grow weary in doing good; for at the due time, you'll reap a harvest. These guys have been so faithful this year, and that's been such a joy to me. And ... when they faced adversity in a basketball sense — I'm not talking about a world sense, a basketball sense — they haven't grown weary in doing the right stuff."

"That's an every-possession mindset," Jerome said. "It's a life mindset."

Virginia summoned the right stuff again against Texas Tech, forcing overtime on De'Andre Hunter's 3-pointer and making 12 of 12 free throws thereafter. The Cavaliers' 1.21 points-per-possession were the

most yielded this season by the Red Raiders, who posted the best adjusted defensive efficiency in the 18 years that Ken Pomeroy has been calculating the stat.

Purdue, Auburn, Texas Tech: So stirring were those games that Virginia's 53-49 Sweet 16 victory over Oregon fades from memory.

And to think that Bennett, his deliberate offense and steadfast defense have long been panned as dull and incapable of winning in March.

"We've been in three of these, in a row, and everybody talks about our style and how boring (it is)," said associate head coach Jason Williford, a senior on U.Va.'s 1995 Elite Eight team. "You can't tell me this isn't good for college basketball. We're pretty good, man. Thankful for where we are, but we're pretty good."

Exceptionally good.

A first-team All-ACC forward and the national Defensive Player of the Year, Hunter likely will be the program's first top-15 NBA draft choice since Bryant Stith in 1992. Guy was first-team All-ACC for the second time, Jerome is projected as an NBA first-rounder, and Diakite has first-round potential. Jack Salt, Braxton Key, Clark and Huff served humbly in less glamorous roles.

And let's not forget Bennett, the ACC Coach of the Year for the fourth time this season, and his assistants. In the wake of unprecedented disappointment, they healed and inspired this team, infused more freedom into the offense and helped the Cavaliers earn their fourth ACC regular-season title in six years.

Yes, this may be derelict and/or illegal, but we're nearly 1,000 words into a Virginia basketball story and haven't mentioned UMBC and the 2018 tournament setback that elevates the Cavaliers' championship to mythical status.

In 1990, UNLV won the national title with a 103-73 demolition of Duke, the largest margin ever in an NCAA final. A year later, Bobby Hurley, Christian Laettner and the Blue Devils returned to the Final Four, defeated the 34-0 Rebels and won the program's first national championship two nights later against Kansas.

In 2001, Maryland squandered a 22-point first-half lead against Duke at the Final Four. A year later, Juan Dixon, Lonny Baxter and the Terps returned to the Final Four and bested Kansas and Indiana to claim Maryland's first national NCAA title.

Virginia's redemption rises above. The Cavaliers' loss to UMBC was the first by a No. 1 tournament seed to a No. 16 and fodder for media questions, spectator taunting and inner reflection.

Virginia coaches and players have admirably owned the result, from the final horn last March 16, to cutting down the nets Monday, and likely beyond.

So now look. The Cavaliers, 31-3 last season, finished their championship quest 35-3. The only ACC program to lose three games or less in consecutive years was N.C. State in 1973 and '74, when the Wolfpack went 27-0 and 30-1.

True to form, Bennett, with modesty, perspective and a dash of religion, put a bow on Virginia's reversal of fortune.

"I'm thankful in a way for what happened," he said of UMBC, "because it drew me closer, most importantly, to my faith in the Lord, drew me closer to my wife and children, just because you realize what's unconditional. In those spots, when the world's telling you you're a failure, you're a loser, and you're the worst thing going, and all that stuff, you say, 'OK, what really matters?' And it pushed me to that in a way. ...

"I think there was a bigger plan going on here, and I didn't need it, but I was used in it. I hope that it's a message for some people out there that there can be hope and joy and resiliency. I'm thankful for what happened. That's why I did what I did at the end. When that horn went off, I just put my head down and said, 'Thank You. I'm humbled, Lord, because I don't deserve to be in this spot, but You chose me to be here, and I'll give thanks.'

"And I told our guys in the locker room, I said, 'Put your arms around each other, take a look at every guy in here, look at each other. Promise me you will remain humble and thankful for this. Don't let this change you. It doesn't have to. We'll have memories.'"

For a lifetime.

Virginia coach Bronco Mendenhall shares poignant memories of his father

https://www.pilotonline.com/sports/college/university-virginia/article_b02c3abc-b62b-11e9-9696-338f5a937d6f.html

CHARLOTTESVILLE

Would you allow an agitated colt to drag you into a muddy pile of manure just to prove a point to your child? Paul Mendenhall did.

Would you hand to that unsuspecting and untrained fifth-grader the keys to the ranch pickup and task him with driving out to feed 200 head of cattle? Mendenhall did.

But for all his eccentric ways, Mendenhall staunchly abided by timeless parenting foundations. He gave his children undivided attention and, by example, taught them the values of hard work, integrity and service.

Those indelible and precious memories visibly moved his youngest son Friday night.

Bronco Mendenhall had just put his Virginia football team through its opening preseason practice. Entering his fourth year coaching the Cavaliers, Mendenhall has the program ascending, and reporters mined routine subjects such as heightened expectations and depth-chart competitions.

But the most revealing exchanges were about his father, who died July 28 at his Utah home. Paul Mendenhall was 88, and his was a remarkable life rooted in his family and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

These were not routine questions and answers. These were raw, poignant and authentic.

"It's been an amazing challenge," Bronco Mendenhall said. "The tender mercy that happened is that the month of July traditionally is a time coaches have a break. Most of the time there's vacation. I went home — my dad has been battling dementia — and I was able to spend the last five weeks with him, providing, being the primary caregiver and I consider that an absolute blessing to have been able to serve him (and) my mom. And it allowed me to have a sense of peace that I couldn't have if I wasn't there seeing it. ...

"My dad was my best friend. Growing up we worked side-by-side, and I didn't really ever have to look outside of his example to know how to conduct myself. ... To me he was the perfect example, not only in faith, but (also) work ethic and character and being what I would consider the patriarch of the family."

That side-by-side work occurred at Dry Creek Ranch, a property Paul Mendenhall purchased just so he could bond with his youngest son. The work was grueling, humbling and relentless, from the breaking of colts to the mucking of stalls.

That puddle of manure? Paul Mendenhall always instructed his sons not to let go of a halter as they were putting it on a colt, even if the colt began to run.

And what if the sons couldn't run fast enough to stay with the colt? Then sacrifice your body and get dragged on your belly.

Well, on this particular day, an especially skittish colt caught the elder Mendenhall off guard, and the next thing you know, he's being dragged and, puddle of manure notwithstanding, there was NO way he was letting go.

Laughing throughout, their affection palpable, the Mendenhalls shared that memory with KSL TV a few years back, and the six-minute video is well worth your time.

And the family pickup? Mendenhall told the story Friday night of how he was barely tall enough to see over the dashboard or reach the gas pedal. Not both, mind you. This was an either-or situation.

So the preteen Bronco Mendenhall strolled over to a tree, broke off a branch and used that to press the gas as he sat tall enough to see over the dash. Oh, and of course the truck had a manual transmission.

"The expectation was I would find a way, and I did," Mendenhall said. "One of our (football program's) guiding principles is 'less drama more work.' He wasn't much for drama. He just liked results, and so I think I've passed on — put it his way, I'm working to pass on all those lessons because I think they help young people grow."

Paul Mendenhall's funeral was Thursday, and Bronco returned to Charlottesville in time to address his players before practice. They have flooded him with texts and cards, and Mendenhall's first priority was thanking everyone.

Then he spoke about his dad.

Paul grew up hard on a California ranch and, like his father, Wendell, served a Mormon mission in New Zealand and became fluent in Maori. He turned down an offer to play football at Stanford, less than 100 miles from home, and instead chose Brigham Young University, where he played tight end and defensive end in 1953 and '54.

After graduation, Paul worked in real estate, investing and ranching, and in 1999 he returned to New Zealand with his wife, Lenore, to serve as the Auckland mission's president for three years.

Bronco Mendenhall described his father's profound impact on so many lives, mostly his, and showed the KSL video to the Cavaliers, who howled at the manure tale.

"It was definitely a rare moment for him to open up like that," linebacker Charles Snowden said, "and it was pretty cool to see that side of him, and we could tell how much he loved his father. The way he just opened up to us and trusted us really meant a lot."

"That was just a moment for us as a team and a family to really dive into how Coach was feeling, get a glimpse of his dad and understand where Coach comes from and why he is the way he is," receivers coach Marques Hagans said. "He is a direct reflection of his dad."

You can't pay Bronco Mendenhall a higher compliment.

"The outpouring of support has been truly special," he said. "I tried to do the best I could (with the team) to frame what family means and what a healthy father-son relationship looks like. ... My healing will come through my team, and I love being with them. They've grown and matured in such a way — to be the recipient of advice and caregiving from young people has really been humbling."

Offensive line coach Garret Tujague has worked for Mendenhall since 2013, the first three seasons at BYU. He met Paul and immediately recognized the father-son bond. Moreover, he sees many of Paul's traits in Bronco's three sons.

"Coach did a lot of things just to get his (dad's) approval," Tujague said. "His dad was everything to him. Most men, when you can say you're directly in line with how your dad lived his life, I think that's pretty powerful. ...

"He was stoic, like Bronco. You felt a comfort and peace when he was around. He had that presence about him."

Paul also had a piercing whistle, and he used it in rounding up sheep, cattle and horses, and to cheer at his sons' games. Bronco said he could hear it from nearly anywhere in the stadium.

"It only happened when I did something good, which was infrequent I would say," Mendenhall said. "But it boosted my confidence, and there was acknowledgment that he was proud of me, and that mattered. I really worked hard -- it mattered to me to gain my dad's respect. And it mattered to me to get his approval. I worked hard for that, just because of the respect I had for him, and his whistle was one of the things that let me know that I was, at least for that moment, on track."

Like his parents, Bronco Mendenhall is a devout Mormon, and that faith in God and belief in an afterlife provide comfort and strength.

"There's grieving, absolutely," Tujague said. "But I think that the way Coach set it up, to be his dad's caregiver over the last month, I think that's been really good for Coach. I think it's been really good for his family, Coach's brothers and, more importantly, his mother."

As his dementia progressed, Paul Mendenhall would only occasionally know which team on the television screen Bronco was coaching. But that didn't matter.

What mattered was the core mission of his son's job and the earned-not-given standard.

"It mattered to him how I treated other people," Mendenhall said, "and it mattered to him that I was teaching young people. I think he expected me to groom them the way he groomed me."

Rediscovering fandom through the Nationals and the eyes of my daughter

<https://www.pilotonline.com/sports/columns/david-teel/vp-sp-nats-world-series-david-teel-20191029-pzzxepmqevfybpffx3x3ivhadu-story.html>

Fandom and I divorced decades ago. The Baltimore Colts moved to Indianapolis, ownership ruined the Baltimore Orioles, and my career axed affinities for the University of Maryland and James Madison, the latter misguided enough to grant me a diploma.

But 10 years ago, I married a fan. A serious fan.

A multi-sport high school athlete and Division III college softball catcher, Jill follows many teams, none with more intensity and anxiety than the Washington Nationals.

Cool thing is, Nats Park is a relatively painless drive, the traffic gods willing. Moreover, the team has a nightly, in-season television presence in Hampton Roads.

So after annual family junkets and countless hours of living-room exposure, I happily reunited with — relapsed into? — fandom.

You know the symptoms. Habitual, spirited and occasionally rational second-guessing of game and roster management. Mood swings rooted in wins and losses. Sleep deprivation when games run late.

The 2019 Nats triggered copious amounts of them all. But after a staggering start and charmed postseason, they earned the franchise's first World Series appearance and gave our family an indelible Sunday night.

In 1971, my dad took his only child to Game 7 of the World Series at Baltimore's Memorial Stadium. The company he worked for had season tickets, and he won the office lottery for Game 7.

Talk about a different era. Our seats, a few rows back from the first-base dugout, cost \$10 each, and the 2 p.m., game lasted two hours and 10 minutes. We were home for dinner.

I was 12, and every pitch seemed like life and death. Orioles lefty Mike Cuellar was exceptional, but Steve Blass was better as the Pittsburgh Pirates won 2-1.

Unlike the Colts' Super Bowl loss to Joe Namath's New York Jets two-plus years earlier, this defeat didn't induce tears. Still, it was darn difficult to accept.

The ticket stub is stashed somewhere in my home office and the images are fresh, from Series MVP Roberto Clemente's home run to Merv Rettenmund's final-out grounder to shortstop.

Forty-eight Octobers later, life came full circle. Sunday, Jill and I took our only child to Nats Park for Game 5 of the World Series against the Houston Astros.

Tiny Teel is 8. She is not fully conversant in baseball rules, but she loves the Nats and has visited the park every summer since her birth. Indeed, the authentic Nats lineup card from the day she was born is framed and hanging in her room.

When Laura learned that Mommy was traveling solo to D.C., for Game 3 of the National League Championship Series against the St. Louis Cardinals, she objected — loudly. Only a promise of staying up past her school-night bedtime to watch the game soothed her.

"Don't worry, Daddy," she said. "If you fall asleep during the game, I'll turn off the TV when it's over."

She was out cold by the third inning.

Not Sunday night. Rockin' a red World Series shirt, she was wired from start to finish, more so than her parents and a majority of the adults around her

As the Astros' lead went from 2-0 to 4-0 to 5-1 to the 7-1 final, we lost faith. Not Laura. Fueled by chicken tenders and Dippin' Dots, she waved her rally towel into the futile ninth inning.

Ah, the innocence and enthusiasm of youth.

Rediscovering that connection to a team, sharing it with family and friends and introducing it to a child, has been magical, even on those nights when the bullpen butchered a lead, or the offense went into hibernation, and the text chain got a little salty.

After the Nats went quietly in the ninth inning Sunday, we commiserated on the concourse with friends: a retired gentleman and his two grown sons. We replayed key sequences, criticized the plate umpire and gazed ahead to the rest of the Series, cautiously optimistic that Anthony Rendon, Trea Turner, Ryan Zimmerman and friends would rally yet again.

Our parting sentiment was most essential. Disappointing result notwithstanding, we'd created family memories.

Just like Dad did for me in 1971.

By the time we strolled back to the hotel, it was almost midnight. Tiny Teel was spent and thankful that we'd be sleeping late.

About that unexcused absence from school Monday? No worries.

Her teacher is a Nats fan. Better yet, she was at the ballpark Sunday night, too, cheering with the rest of us.