

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Foothills Columnist Attends Final Four

The first thing you should know is that I'm a college basketball fanatic. The annual NCAA basketball tournament – March Madness and the Final Four – are as good as my sports world gets. Usually I'm glued to the TV, filling out my *Sports Illustrated* centerfold bracket to record the results of all 44 games, as 65 teams fight their way through the elimination tourney.

Wonderfully, this year, I am here in Indianapolis, Indiana at the Final Four, courtesy of Pat's fantastic gift for my 70th birthday. We're here on a Prime Sports package that provided us four nights at a very nice hotel, all kinds of hospitality suite privileges and special events, and very good seats for the two semifinal games on Saturday and the championship game on Monday.

Leaving Tucson before sunrise last Friday, we flew to Indianapolis. It was like coming home – I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky and drove back and forth through Indianapolis to Purdue University in the 1960s. During the 1970s, Pat lived in Richmond, Indiana – 70 miles east of Indianapolis, near the border with Ohio.

By the time we got to the Final Four, our former home-area teams from Kentucky, Louisville, Notre Dame, Ohio University, Ohio State, Purdue, and Xavier had all been eliminated. However, tiny 4000-student Butler University – only 5.9 miles from the stadium in Indianapolis – had survived to become the surprise dark horse competitor and our rooting favorite. Indianapolis was in frenzy over their local team!

In the semifinals on Saturday, Butler won an exciting, physical game over Michigan State by two points, while Duke easily beat West Virginia. In the championship game on Monday night, Butler did themselves proud but lost to a solid Duke team by two points.

Additional thoughts and impressions from our adventure:

Indianapolis had everything we needed – hotel, restaurants, pubs, event sites, and of course the basketball stadium – all within a few blocks of each other. The place was filled with throngs of happy people, “Final Four” and “The Road Ends Here” signs, and souvenir shops where you could buy Final Four team caps and shirts with a zillion variations of design and logos. There were also several venues – the biggest in a tent right across the street from our hotel room – that played horrendously loud music nightly until 2:00 am.

The people were very friendly – both welcoming hosts and visitors. Some weren't planning on attending the basketball games – they joined festivities just for the fun.

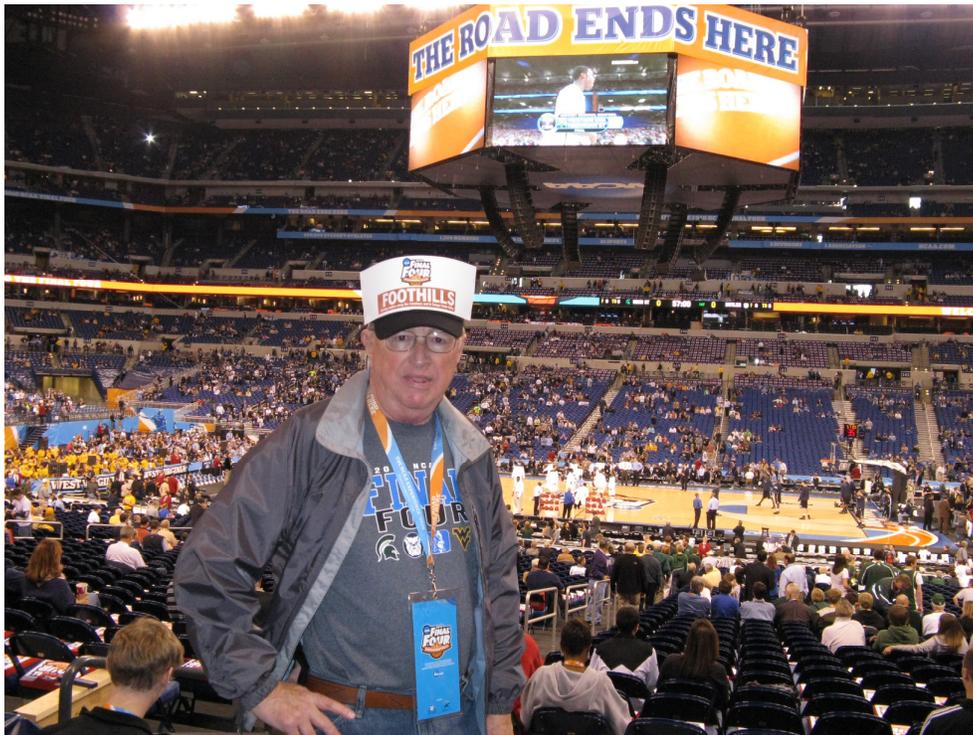
At Bracket Town we found the huge Convention Center filled with stations to shoot hoops; get your photo taken in poses to simulate being in your favorite school's team picture, broadcasting the Final Four, or participating in the final seconds of a close game; sports clinics; and autograph sessions.

At the Elite Experience, held in Union Station before the games, we had gourmet buffets, while listening to live entertainment and sports talk with coaches and basketball notables.

Lucas Oil Stadium was built for football (Indianapolis Colts), but able to accommodate over 71,000 people for basketball. Security for entry to the stadium was more stringent than I've experienced elsewhere – including “pat-downs” by same-sex staffers for males and females entering in separate lines.

Well thought out ticket sales to the Final Four schools provided seating for fans (and the bands) in the lower levels of the four corners of the stadium.- which made for some spirited cheering.

I'm going to have to come up with something pretty grand to do for Pat to thank her for this absolutely wonderful experience. Any ideas?



Bob Ring plays the role of Foothills sports reporter at the Final Four basketball tournament in Indianapolis. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)