

3.13.2009

THIRTY YEARS OF MADNESS

Thirty years. *Thirty years!* Seriously? It's been thirty years since the face of basketball, both collegiately and professionally, changed forever? It was late March of 1979 when the college Final Four included two guys who changed their sport forever.

Every sport has that one or two guys who can be credited with "saving" their sport. In baseball, it was Babe Ruth and the way he dominated the game on the heels of the 1919 Black Sox gambling scandal. In golf, it was Tiger Woods, who introduced a whole new group of people to the sport, and caused the player to actually become athletes, having to train harder and harder every year to keep up with him.

And, with all apologies to Michael Jordan, in basketball, it was two guys who came out of the Midwest back in 1979. One was a brash, outspoken, incredibly talented black kid with a gigantic smile that lit up the gymnasium who they simply called "Magic." The other came off initially as a quiet, even sullen, white guy that couldn't jump 2 inches off the floor. He was slow, incredibly ugly, and was known by a lot of names, including "The Hick from French Lick (his hometown)."

The college basketball tournament changed that year. That was, and still is, the highest rated game in NCAA history. Not just championship game - game, period. That's the kind of drawing power those two guys had. It carried over to the professional level, too, as their classic battles throughout the 80s and early 90s are legendary.

A few short years after Bird and Magic played that Final Four that piqued everyone's interest, the field expanded to 64 teams. With that expansion and increased interest came the office bracket pools and the frenzy that everyone now has with getting, ahem, "sick" on those first two days of the tournament. The term "March Madness" was born during that time. Some will tell you that ESPN and CBS and their coverage are what generated that frenzy. Some will tell you it is the number of Cinderella's that have one first or second round games the past 30 years. I'll tell you that I think it is the two guys who saved that sport, Bird and Magic.